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Abu Ghraib and Torture Porn Cinema: How the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* Series Manifested Social Fears of Torture Following the Release of the Abu Ghraib Photographs

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Abu Ghraib and Torture Porn Cinema: How the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* Series Manifested Social Fears of Torture Following the Release of the Abu Ghraib Photographs

by

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Dedication

To my parents: to my dad for taking me at an early age to watch my first horror movie, and to my mom for sitting through *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* on my 13th birthday. I owe this report, and all of my future success, to your unconditional love and support.

Abstract

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This qualitative study examines how the 'torture porn' film franchises *Saw* (2004-2010), *Hostel* (2006, 2007), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010, 2013) manifested societal fears of torture following the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs in April of 2004. These photos depicted U.S. soldiers torturing and sexually humiliating Iraqi prisoners and served as a flashpoint within a larger narrative on torture, morality, and the War on Terror. This study is divided into two main chapters: a textual analysis and a paratextual analysis. The textual analysis chapter examines the major thematic connections between the three torture porn series and the issues surrounding Abu Ghraib, and is supported by a study of the stylistic choices of each movie and how these choices supported key themes from Abu Ghraib by challenging viewers' identification with characters. The second chapter examines Abu Ghraib iconography present in torture porn to consider how symbolic imagery such as the Hooded Man photo manifested larger social issues of

torture, as well as how this iconography permeated the public sphere via graphic movie posters and suggestive trailers that encouraged Western viewers to address the threat of torture at a paratextual level.

Previous research has examined how the horror genre adapted to a post-9/11 society, though far fewer studies have directly connected these movies to the events at Abu Ghraib. This study contributes to existing literature by combining the two research methods to consider how the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* torture porn series not only continued the horror genre's tradition of tapping into social anxieties, but also how these movies pushed this relationship into a more direct place by exploiting fears of torture following Abu Ghraib.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> The horror movie is just sitting there waiting to deal with this [9/11]. It is one of the most versatile genres out there, a universal solvent of virtually any issue. And it is now perfectly positioned to cop some serious attitude, to play a role where it's not simply a date movie but going further back to […] where you have the horror movie as metaphor.
>
> - Robert J. Thompson, Syracuse University (quoted in *The New York Times*, 10/23/2001)

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 presented an unparalleled level of fear, anguish, and horror for Western society. In a day that "started out like any other," as many would claim, men affiliated with the Muslim extremist group Al-Qaeda hijacked four passenger planes and crashed three of them into pre-selected targets. Two planes crashed into the World Trade Centers in New York, one crashed into the western side of the Pentagon, and the fourth crashed in a rural field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. This plane did not reach its intended target as passengers and crew of flight United 93 retaliated against their hijackers, though many experts and analysts speculate its anticipated final destination to have been The White House. Including those who perished on the planes, at each of the struck locations, and in the immediate areas affected by the attacks, the death toll reached approximately 2,977 victims (CBC News, 2011; CNN, 2015). In response to these attacks, the United States retaliated with an international military campaign known as The War on Terror. Wolfe (2008) concisely summarized Bush's speech on 09/20/2001 regarding the purpose of this war: to "eliminate terrorist targets within Afghanistan and prevent future losses from the terrorist threat" (p. 45).

Following these attacks, Anthony Lane (2001) of *The New Yorker* stated that 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror presented "circumstances that Hollywood should no

longer try to match." Critics and scholars predicted the death of the horror genre in particular, as there seemed no room for the consumption of on-screen violence and sadism in a post-9/11 society that had witnessed real horror. The horror genre, it seemed, was caught in a catch-22: it could no longer match the true terror Western society experienced on 9/11 as any onscreen violence would pale in comparison to the attacks, but if it somehow did, it risked traumatizing and reminding viewers of one of the darkest days in American history.

Contrary to these predictions, the horror genre not only survived after the events of September 11 but it *thrived*. While the '90s presented post-modern, self-aware horror like the *Scream* series (1996-2000) and *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), a meta horror-thriller in which iconic slasher Freddy Krueger invades the "real world" and kills crew members of his previous movies, post-9/11 horror cinema "would return to a hardcore expression of body-horror" (Ndalianis, 2012, p. 33) with gritty realism and sadistic violence that tapped into social issues more directly and explicitly than the genre had in previous decades. This study focuses on the most commercially successful of these subgenres, "torture porn," and its connection to an event that served as a flashpoint within a larger narrative on torture, morality, and the War on Terror: the revelation of the Abu Ghraib photographs.

In April of 2004 the television program *60 Minutes* and *The New Yorker* magazine published photos of the U.S. military's inhumane treatment and torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. These images depicted U.S. soldiers committing such acts as placing prisoners in sexually humiliating positions, piling naked prisoners on top of one another to form a human pyramid, and, in arguably the most recognized and iconic photo to emerge, forcing a hooded prisoner to stand on top of a box with electrical wires attached to his body. The photos were so shocking and repulsive that journalists ran such

headlines as, “The Images that Shamed America” (*The Guardian*, 2004) and claimed “[the photos] set the cause of democracy back by a generation” (Leigh, 2004).

Later that same year, Lionsgate released the low-budget torture horror movie *Saw* (2004), which details the ordeal of two morally corrupt men chained inside a dilapidated bathroom and forced to atone for their sins by playing a serial killer’s increasingly sadistic games. Despite modest expectations and a production budget of only $1.2 million, the movie grossed $55 million domestically and over $100 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo). This success spawned six sequels and ultimately became the most profitable horror franchise of all time, grossing $416 million at the U.S. box office and $872 million internationally. Though critics were quick to denigrate the movies and call them “cruelly empty and infantile” (Germain, 2004), “a glorified snuff film” (Roeper, 2004), and “a contrived, unlovable gorefest” (Gritten 2004), the grosses for this series proved American audiences wanted more of this type of horror.

The trend further developed in early 2006 when Eli Roth’s *Hostel* employed a similarly exploitative film angle that depicted sadistic and graphic scenes of torture. Roth’s film tells the story of two college students backpacking across Europe who find themselves in the middle of a business in which wealthy clients pay to torture and kill kidnapped tourists. *Hostel* is one of the only movies of its subgenre to currently have a “fresh” rating on RottenTomatoes.com with an approval rating of 61% from professional critics, and it almost equaled *Saw* commercially with a total domestic gross of $47 million. In response to the commercial and relative critical success of *Hostel*, David Edelstein (2006) of New Yorker Magazine wrote the landmark article “Torture Porn: The Sadistic Movie Trend,” which established the unofficial yet commonly used name for the subgenre.

"Torture porn" movies frequently depicted unflinching and brutal acts of torture during a time when America was at war and engulfed in a national debate over the very same concept. The success of this subgenre even warranted the "inevitable rebirth" (Groen, 2010) of the 1978 rape-revenge cult horror movie *I Spit on Your Grave*. Updated for a post-Abu Ghraib environment in which torture was a nationally discussed topic, the 2010 remake, like the original, centers on a woman who is brutally beaten, raped, and left for dead by four men. After surviving the ordeal, she returns to maim, torture, and kill her former tormentors in increasingly graphic and sexual ways. A sequel soon followed, expectedly titled *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (2013), in which a different female protagonist endures a similar ordeal and again wreaks havoc on a group of men. Though these two movies, like the *Saw* franchise, were critically reviled, they resonated with the American public and drew both implicit and explicit parallels to Abu Ghraib.

It hardly seems to be a coincidence that audiences paid to watch the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series following the revelation of the Abu Ghraib photographs depicting eerily similar acts of violence. Despite these movies' temporal proximity to Abu Ghraib, American professional critics surprisingly overlooked what now appears to be an obvious connection of the hooded victim trope, which prominently appears not only in the Abu Ghraib photos but also reoccurs throughout several torture porn films. Contemporary critics clearly overlooked crucial aspects of these movies by failing to connect them to the major ongoing social issue of their time, and there is still much room for analysis regarding the depth and relevance of the torture porn subgenre to a post-Abu Ghraib society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

For a country questioning its own government by debating the justification of torture at Abu Ghraib, the horror genre "emerged as a rare protected space to critique the tone and content of public discourse" (Briefel and Miller, 2011, p. 3). This study examines three torture porn series as examples of "protected spaces" that specifically critiqued the issues and discourse surrounding the Abu Ghraib photos. The following section analyzes how horror has often served allegorical functions during times of civil and social unrest. As Thompson (2001) discussed in the opening quote, horror can act as a "universal solvent of any issue" and the genre has manifested major tragic events throughout American history. Horror cinema may have slipped into escapist, post-modern territory in the '90s that best suited couples on date night, but post-9/11 and specifically post-Abu Ghraib the genre returned with an increased realism to satisfy the dual roles of entertainment and allegory for social issues. Critical and journalistic discourse surrounding these movies are also examined to consider how top professional critics "read" these movies, and as mentioned earlier most critics did *not* connect torture porn to the ongoing social event of Abu Ghraib. If professional critics did not make this connection, then how did they read these movies? Though few references were made specifically to Abu Ghraib, were any connections made between torture porn and wider social issues such as the War on Terror?

The study then transitions into a textual analysis divided into two sections that examine the major thematic and stylistic connections between the three torture porn series and the issues and images surrounding Abu Ghraib. For example, the photographs presented irrefutable visual proof that the presumably morally superior U.S. military is capable of barbaric acts, like our enemies. This issue is thematically manifested in all three torture porn series as the primary fictional torturers are all American and often

torture their victims in sexual manners similar to those at Abu Ghraib. These shared themes between torture porn and the Abu Ghraib photos are supported by the following section analyzing film techniques of the three series, and how stylistic choices such as a scene unfolding from the torturer's point-of-view contributed to the audience's identification with and interpretation of these texts. The *mise-en-scène* of these movies— e.g. setting, set décor, and color— is also analyzed to reveal the extent to which the three series paralleled the Abu Ghraib photos with not just visually similar torture methods but with similar torture environments as well.

The next chapter is a paratextual analysis that is also split into two sections, the first of which examines Abu Ghraib iconography in the three film series to consider how such symbolic imagery as the Hooded Man photo manifested larger social issues of torture. Specific attention is given to this iconic image of a hooded victim that is usually in a seated position as a torturer stands nearby. This imagery reappears explicitly in both of the *Hostel* movies as characters find themselves in strikingly similar positions. This visual motif also appears in the *Saw* franchise, though implicitly as victims are often tortured with creative devices around their heads that sometimes obscure their vision and often lead to their demise. Though the two *I Spit on Your Grave* movies do not have any hooded victims, they do both have characters that are sexually tortured in manners similar to Abu Ghraib. For example, in an almost exact replication of the photo depicting U.S. soldier Lynndie England "walking" an Iraqi prisoner with a leash around his neck like a dog, the central female character of *I Spit on Your Grave 2* tethers a collar to a man's neck and tortures him. Lastly, Lionsgate's promotional materials for the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies and Anchor Bay Entertainment's materials for *I Spit on Your Grave* and its sequel are examined to reveal the extent to which this loaded imagery of torture permeated the public sphere via movie posters (present everywhere from outside a movie theater to a

billboard off a highway) and trailers that appeared in theaters and on television for home audiences. It is argued that, following Abu Ghraib, viewers addressed the relevant threat of torture by "seeing" these movies at a paratextual level through these movies' graphic posters and suggestive trailers.

Scholars have connected horror movies with post-9/11 American society (e.g. Hantke, 2010; Briefel and Miller, 2011; Wetmore, 2012), though most remain largely focused on 9/11 and not Abu Ghraib. Far fewer have examined torture porn within the specific context of a post-Abu Ghraib environment in which torture was a nationally discussed and debated concept. How could such a violent subgenre that is "widely considered the lowest common denominator in the global reinvestment of horror in the new millennium" (Briefel and Miller, 2011, p. 84) resonate with audiences so well at a time of ideological crisis and war? This study investigates how the three torture porn series manifested societal fears of torture following the release of the Abu Ghraib photos.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars and critics have noted the complicated relationship between cinema and society since film emerged. Horror cinema in particular has long been regarded as a cultural forum for events and issues that aren't yet settled in society, which has flourished amidst times of ideological crisis and national trauma (Towlson, 2014, p. 6). The genre has proven to be remarkably resilient in relation to this complex relationship with society as it has manifested, tapped into, and exploited social anxieties throughout history. There is no consistent relationship between horror movies and society; the only consistency is that there *is* a relationship.

Many scholarly studies have analyzed classical horror cinema of the 1930s in relation to major issues of the decade. Matthews (2009) wrote that horror movies and

society intersect, and that horror manifests specific events and personalities of their era (Kracauer, 1946; Prince, 2004; Humphries, 2006; Wetmore, 2012). He argues horror movies of the '30s such as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932) manifested social fears of the Great Depression and the start of World War II. For example, Matthews cites the specific scene in *Dracula* when the title character treats Renfield (Dwight Frye), a businessman, to a late-night dinner. After Renfield falls unconscious from a drug in his wine, Dracula drinks Renfield's blood and enslaves him. Matthews argues that Renfield epitomizes a Depression victim in becoming an unwilling and lifeless servant, and like the real-life investors wiped out by the 1929 crash, he falls from prosperity to despair to become a "deranged shell of his former self" (p. 19). Renfield is also locked in a cell and forced to eat whatever he can catch—mostly flies, though on occasion he catches a large spider. Matthews argues these themes of starvation and desperation in *Dracula* exploited the anxieties of the destitute people during the Great Depression who were forced to scavenge for food in order to survive. He concludes his analysis by noting *Dracula*'s commercial success, as it ultimately grossed $700,000 and became Universal's most successful film of 1931 (p. 25). Industry insiders were astonished by its success as they firmly believed confronting audiences with the true grimness of life during this period would be box office poison. However, the allegorical elements of *Dracula*—a story where a monstrous nobleman menaces average people who manage to prevail and defeat the threat— seemed to resonate with audiences' anxieties during the harsh social climate of the Depression.

Other scholars focused on different themes and relationships between 1930s horror cinema and society, such as xenophobia or rebellion against censorship. Phillips (2005) discussed xenophobia in these movies, arguing that Americans feared they were getting dragged into chaos by outside (German) forces and became fearful of the

"others," best represented by *Dracula*'s depiction of a foreign stranger within their midst (p. 40). Monument (2009) asserted horror movies as a manifestation of the domestic turmoil resulting from the rise of Nazis in Europe. This turmoil is best evidenced by the implementation of the Hollywood Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, in the early '30s. This code established censorship guidelines regulating what was perceived at the time to be a risqué industry after the previous decade of unprincipled films and scandals involving the Hollywood elite. It strictly prohibited such on-screen acts as profanity, nudity, and drugs, and also enforced that all movie monsters be defeated so that the American public would not witness an allegorical antagonist triumphing over the country during WWII (Monument, 2009).

Kracauer (1946), writing after the end of World War II, examined 1940s horror movies' intricate relationship with society and how this genre, as it has throughout its history, connected to social issues and fears specific to its era. He argued these horror films manifested similar issues of wartime propaganda and anti-Nazi films by cultivating "the same kind of horror sheerly for the sake of entertainment" and noted Hollywood films "saturated with terror and sadism" became commonplace in a post-war society (p. 105). An important theme of these films, and a contrast to 1930s horror such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* which depicted easily identifiable antagonists, is that the monster frequently lived in disguise amongst society. Evil no longer marked or defined a person's face or manner, and Kracauer attributed this to a transfer to the American scene of the "weird, veiled insecurity of life under the Nazis" (p. 106) where any trusted neighbor or friend may have hidden sinister intentions. The Hitchcock films *Suspicion* (1941) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) best represented these themes of skepticism and paranoia, as both movies centered on seemingly ordinary characters (both men) with menacing ulterior motives. *Suspicion* follows a shy young heiress who marries a charming

gentleman, but she soon suspects that he is plotting to murder her (IMDb.com). Similarly, the protagonist of *Shadow of a Doubt* has her initial reservations regarding her Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) confirmed when he attempts to murder her two separate times to cover up his dark past. Both exemplify accumulated apprehension, threatening allusions and dreadful possibilities in a world where "everybody is afraid of everybody" and "no one knows when or where the ultimate and inevitable horror will arrive" (p. 106). Kracauer concludes it was no coincidence that the kind of horror formerly attributed only to life under Hitler in anti-Nazi thrillers was acclimated to the American scene, and he specifically cites the "sadistic energies" in 1940s society as fuel for these themes.

The '60s provides another example of a tumultuous decade of civil unrest over such national traumas as the assassination of president John F. Kennedy and the Vietnam War when horror films again tapped into social anxieties. Arguably one of the most subversive horror movies is George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) for its successful integration and manifestation of ongoing social issues during this decade. Towlson (2014) examined how Romero's text not only signaled a "fundamental shift in the horror film paradigm" (p. 104) but also the many ways in which it alluded to the Vietnam War. He argues *Night of the Living Dead*'s commitment to subversion and political allegory is crystallized early in the film with a single image: an American flag in a graveyard. When Johnny (Russell Steiner) and Barbra (Judith O'Dea) drive into the cemetery to visit their father's grave, the camera frames an American flag in the foreground. This juxtaposition between the pride of the American flag and a graveyard is "overtly political" symbolism (p. 108), according to Towlson, and the image manifests the concept that America and death became synonymous during the Vietnam War. This was also the first war to be televised for national audiences, with technological innovations such as the use of videotape and the same-day broadcast allowing for the

American public to see the true brutalities of war and arguably contributing to the perception of the social breakdown in the '60s— which is perhaps best manifested by the hordes of zombies that kill for survival. Televised news programs provided visual proof of the death and destruction in Vietnam, and these images strongly influenced an anti-Vietnam sentiment that's exploited in *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero's film comments self-reflexively on the influence of television images during the war (p. 106), and these comments are enhanced by the director's technical choices. For example, he intentionally filmed parts of the movie hand-held to make it look like the news from Vietnam (Kane, 2010), so the violence and death onscreen would have an enhanced realism and parallel the real death of war. Towlson saw this "almost newsreel-like photography" (p. 106) as one of the many examples of the movie's iconography alluding to the war.

Then came the day that would alter not just the horror genre but the American psyche and way of life: September 11, 2001. Though many critics and scholars expected the horror genre to either revert to the fantastical monsters of the '40s or gradually decline into obscurity, the genre again proved its resilience and flourished. Horror cinema began this new era by creatively sidestepping the real terror of 9/11 and remaking Asian genre classics to breathe new life into the American horror film. As Lim (2007) argues, "since at least 2001, Hollywood [was] in the grips of an Asian horror remake frenzy" (p. 110). This "transnational exchange" started with the stunning success of *The Ring* (2002), a remake of the Japanese *Ringu* (1998), which terrified American audiences with its novel appeal and finished with a worldwide gross of almost $250 million (Box Office Mojo). The 2000s trend of "reviving" Asian-horror movies continued with remakes like *The Grudge* (2004), *Dark Water* (2005), *The Ring 2* (2005), and *Pulse* (2006). Though these remakes achieved varying degrees of critical and commercial success, they seemed to rarely, if ever, tap into major social issues of a post-9/11 American society. It could be

argued this was a crucial reason for this trend's success, as it eased Western audiences back into horror under the guise of another country's cinematic staples and traditions— similar to *Dracula* in the early '30s and other classic horror cycles throughout history. Though reasons for its success may vary, the Asian horror revival sparked life and interest back into a genre that, for a time, had an uncertain future and place within American culture.

Wetmore (2012) argues that horror cinema transformed after the terrorist attacks on September 11. He claims the key difference between horror pre-9/11 and post-9/11 is that "the former frequently allows for hope and the latter just as frequently does not" (p. 2). Wetmore contrasts the conclusions to popular horror titles before and after the terrorist attacks to support his argued paradigm shift to nihilism in horror. Iconic slashers of the '70s and '80s such as Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, and Freddy Krueger are either (temporarily) defeated or at the very least a character— usually the "Final Girl" (Clover, 1992, p. 35)— survives the ordeal. Chief of Police Martin Brody in *Jaws* (1975) is able to overcome his hydrophobia and avenge multiple deaths by blowing up the killer shark. And in one of the most recognized examples of good prevailing over evil, Regan MacNeil is exorcized of the demonic spirit at the end of *The Exorcist* (1974). Following 9/11, however, horror movies no longer concluded optimistically as nihilism, despair, random violence and death assumed far greater prominence in horror cinema. As Wetmore bluntly stated, "the horror film ends in hope up to September 10th" (p. 3).

A handful of horror subgenres emerged following 9/11: "home invasion" horror, "found footage," and "torture porn." Unlike the Asian remakes, these movies were socially relevant to a society at war as they drew more realistic parallels to major issues. As Ndalianis (2012) argued, a "socio-political undercurrent […] runs through the new 21st century wave of horror films" (p. 20). Home invasion thrillers such as *The Strangers*

(2008), *The Collector* (2009), and Michael Haneke's American adaptation of *Funny Games* (2007) centered on the disturbance of the domestic space as unknown murderers intrude upon an innocent couple or family's house and wreak havoc. This served as a potent allegory for the terrorist attacks as unknown individuals (the terrorists) intruded upon someone else's territory (the U.S.) and wreaked havoc by hijacking and crashing four planes that resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 victims.

Found footage movies, most notably the *Paranormal Activity* series, depict protagonists that document the fictional horror with their own cameras. This is a strong allusion to September 11 when civilians documented the real chaos themselves with their own devices, allowing the terror to unfold before the nation's eyes and play out on various media in real time. Additionally, movies in this subgenre "situate surveillance as the central theme or as the primary structuring element of the narrative" and highlight thematic concerns of a surveillance culture (Briefel and Miller, 2011, p. 83).

Following 9/11, and specifically following the torture at Abu Ghraib, the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies shocked and appalled audiences with their prolonged depictions of sadistic violence. Years after the release of these movies and the same year as *I Spit on Your Grave*, as the cycle of torture coalesced in American horror cinema, J. Morris (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 2010, p. 45) set four distinctive features that a movie under the "torture porn" label must meet:

- Torture must be the primary vehicle of fear
- Torture must be a "realistic depiction"
- Torture must also be supported by rationale or reason
- A victim must ultimately transform into a torturer him/herself

These guidelines distinguished torture porn from movies in other genres that merely contained scenes of torture. For example, while James Bond (Daniel Craig) is

tortured in a realistic manner in *Casino Royale* (2006) by an antagonist with rationale, the movie does not qualify as torture porn because torture is not the primary vehicle of fear and Bond does not later become a torturer himself.

Wetmore (2012) continues the tradition of scholars connecting horror movies to society with an examination of torture porn and "what it means to be American" (p. 95), as the chapter subtitle states. He argues the rest of the world is hostile to Americans in these movies, and that being an American in and of itself makes one a target (p. 100)—with parallels drawn to the War on Terror as well. While Wetmore's analysis of the connection between 9/11 and horror cinema is elaborate, there is only a small portion devoted to the specific connection shared between torture porn and Abu Ghraib. He does address certain key issues, such as the complex and ambiguous stances Western society adopted regarding torture in the name of war, though the mentions are brief and call for a more developed analysis.

Other scholars have examined the connection between horror movies and post-9/11 societal issues, though most studies connect these movies to 9/11 in general and not Abu Ghraib specifically. For example, Towlson (2014) argues the international instability resulting from the attacks created a "context for the re-emergence of subversive horror cinema" (p. 213) that criticized the Bush administration and their ineffective policies. Briefel and Miller (2011) also wrote extensively on how the horror genre shifted post-9/11 to tap into societal fears, but their focus remained on the genre as a whole as well. When they did address torture porn, the two authors examined the politics of video and the aforementioned "surveillance narratives" (p. 83) in the subgenre. They also claim that the torture porn subgenre "oddly [tried] to work through some of the complexity of the experience of violence […] and the responses to these violences" (p. 86). A detailed

comparison of post-9/11 political vs. horror movies does follow, but there is no mention of Abu Ghraib.

Though studies have specifically connected torture porn with Abu Ghraib, their focus is frequently on an individual and specific theme. For example, Tziallas (2013) complements Briefel and Miller's study with an examination of surveillance as an allegory for gazing in relation to the Abu Ghraib photos. Ndalianis (2012) argues torture porn ruthlessly confronted viewers with "violence, intense gore, and, often, a social critique that refuses to hold back the punches" (p. 15). She addressed the social relevance of these texts, but Ndalianis' core argument is on the sensory impact of graphic depictions of horror violence.

Lastly, there are examples of studies successfully analyzing the horror subgenre, yet not connecting these movies to a post-Abu Ghraib society. Ochoa (2011) labels the antagonists of these texts as "deformed and destructive beings" (p. 2) and he notes that in torture porn these beings often subvert expectations and do *not* die at the end. Because the torturers in both *Hostel* movies are part of a larger organization (i.e. the Elite Hunting Club), Ochoa argues that evil will "live on even if a vengeful victim manages to kill one hunter or another" (p. 36). This could be read as an allegory for the War on Terror; the U.S. has captured and killed Osama Bin Laden, then Saddam Hussein, and undoubtedly countless more high priority enemies of the country, yet it is still engulfed in a violent and costly war. Despite the victories, evil lives on.

Scholars have analyzed both torture porn cinema and Abu Ghraib, and some have even argued for the former's social relevance in explicit connection to the latter (Briefel and Miller, 2011; Wetmore, 2012), but a complementary examination of professional critics' reviews on RottenTomatoes.com reveals that top American critics unexpectedly overlooked this social relevance in their analyses of torture porn movies. RottenTomatoes

aggregates critics' reviews of movies and averages their scores to determine whether a text is "fresh" (60% approval rating or higher) or "rotten" (below 60%). RT includes many types of movie critics, ranging from well-established and respected critics to those working independently or for small organizations. In addition to the previously discussed scholars, this study gauged top critics because they "still set the terms and tone of critical discussion on American film [by providing] the first phase of evaluation, theoretical formulation, and canon formation" (Schatz, 2012).

Saw was the first torture porn movie to be released following the Abu Ghraib photographs on October 29, 2004. Though the issue of torture had been popularly debated and contested since the photos' release six months prior to *Saw*, this was the first movie at this time to introduce torture as entertainment. Out of the 39 top professional critics reviewing *Saw*, twelve gave it a favorable, or "fresh," rating for an overall unfavorable rating with an approval consensus of 31%. Many critics were quick to note the brutality and extremity of violence in the torture-horror film. Some critics did not mind the carnage, such as Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* who called the movie "cheerfully gruesome" (2004). Rex Reed of the *New York Observer* echoed Ebert's praise with a favorable review: "The gore is relentless and in your face, and if you grew up glued to the old Universal fright flicks like I did, you won't want to miss a minute of the mayhem" (2004).

While some top critics found the violence manageable, most were taken aback by *Saw*'s prolonged and graphic depictions of torture. As mentioned above, critics denigrated the film as "sadistic" (J.R. Jones, *Chicago Reader*; Stephen Holden, *New York Times*), "cruel" (David Germain, *Associated Press*; David Hiltbrand, *Philadelphia Inquirer*), and "a glorified snuff film" (Richard Roeper, *Chicago Sun-Times*). Critics also

compared *Saw* to the far-more critically lauded classic *Se7en* (1995), connecting the two movies' major theme of a serial killer driven by morals and principles.

Despite many of the top critics mentioning the violence and torture of *Saw*, only one critic specifically referenced Abu Ghraib or the national debate on torture. Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* titled his review, "A Gore Fest, With Overtones of Iraq and TV" (2004). He argues that even though *Saw* wrapped production well before the revelation of the Abu Ghraib photos, its torture— specifically the central premise of two men shackled to a pipe in a dirty bathroom— "bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the infamous Iraqi prison photos" (2004). Not only does Holden acknowledge the timeline of *Saw*'s release in relation to Abu Ghraib, but he explicitly connects the two to argue that watching a torture-centered horror movie at that time could not be viewed without recalling the brutal acts at Abu Ghraib.

Though Holden was the only top critic to make this direct connection, two other critics hinted at the *Saw* series' real-world relevance. Bruce Westbrook (*Houston Chronicle*, 2004) wrote, "*Saw* enthralls with realistic terrors," possibly hinting at the real torture at Abu Ghraib. Rob Nelson of *The Village Voice* stated, "*Saw* III became the Iraq War era's bloodiest chart-topping torture movie" (2004). The critics' reviews of *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II* similarly focused on the sadistic onscreen violence, with the addition of asking whether torture-horror was now becoming a trend. Tirdad Derakhshani of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was the only critic of both *Hostel* movies that I found to explicitly connect the texts to Abu Ghraib. After calling Roth a "very talented filmmaker" and making an attempt to name the subgenre ("horror porn"), Derakhshani noted, "[*Hostel*] raised important questions about the place of violence in civilized society in a post-Sept. 11 and post-Abu Ghraib world. It asked whether our boys [our troops] must shed their 'civilized' ethos and become vicious monsters to match up with our enemies" (2006).

Critics followed a similar path when reviewing the *I Spit on Your Grave* series by largely overlooking these movies' possible connections to social issues, as only the aforementioned Rick Groen (2010) of *The Globe and Mail* made an explicit connection to Abu Ghraib in his review. Critics largely focused on comparisons to the 1978 original of the same name, such as Jason Anderson (*Toronto Star*, 2010) who called the remake "just as troubling" as its predecessor and noted the increase in sadistic violence to "better suit the taste of today's *Saw* fan base." Critics were, however, quick to make this connection to other torture porn movies, most notably to Jigsaw's elaborate contraptions of the *Saw* series as the female protagonists of *I Spit on Your Grave* and *I Spit on Your Grave 2* execute their former tormentors in increasingly creative (and as some critics argued, ridiculous) manners. Joshua Rothkopf of *Time of New York* stated that the "retributive torture sequences approach *Saw* levels of unlikelihood," and Lisa Schwarzbaum (*Entertainment Weekly*) asserted that the 1978 *I Spit on Your Grave* was "made back when torture porn was readily identified as disgusting and worthy of outrage." Though critics referenced the torture porn subgenre frequently in their reviews, only Dennis Harvey of *Variety* connected these films to a different torture series in his accusation of *I Spit on Your Grave 2* "cribbing elements of *Hostel*." Despite these series developing horror cinema into a more realistic art form that directly tapped into relevant social issues (as opposed to the genre's abstract connections of previous decades), very few scholars and even fewer critics made this association with Abu Ghraib. There may be thematic, visual, or even technical connections between torture porn and society that go well beyond what scholars and critics have traditionally discussed.

This study contributes to existing literature by combining textual and paratextual analyses to make these connections explicit and to address the multiple ways in which torture porn manifested social anxieties following Abu Ghraib. The following textual

analysis chapter examines the major thematic connections between the three torture porn series and the issues surrounding Abu Ghraib, and is supported by a study of the stylistic choices of each movie and how these choices supported key themes from Abu Ghraib by challenging viewers' identification with characters. The next chapter analyzes Abu Ghraib iconography present in torture porn to consider how symbolic imagery such as the Hooded Man photo manifested larger social issues of torture, and how this iconography permeated the public sphere via graphic movie posters and suggestive trailer that encouraged Western viewers to address the threat of torture at a paratextual level. Though there are dozens of post-9/11 horror movies that could be categorized under the torture porn label (e.g. *Borderland*, 2007; *Captivity*, 2007; *Untraceable*, 2008) all ranging in critical and commercial success, this study will only include the seven *Saw* movies (2004-2010), the two widely-released *Hostel* movies (2006, 2007), and the two *I Spit on Your Grave* movies (2010, 2013). *Hostel: Part III* (2011) will not be included in this study because of its drastic differences from the other two *Hostel* films. It was the only movie in the series released straight-to-DVD, and no major individuals, cast or crew, from the first two movies were involved. It is also the only *Hostel* entry to *not* be set abroad, and thus loses the underlying xenophobic terror of the series. International, post-9/11 horror films that qualify as torture porn will also be excluded, such as France's *High Tension* (2003), Australia's *Wolf Creek* (2005), and South Korea's *I Saw the Devil* (2010). This is so the study's focus remains on how American cinema manifested American society's fears of torture following the release of Abu Ghraib photographs.

Chapter 2: Textual Analysis of Torture Porn Cinema and the Abu Ghraib Photographs

The following chapter examines various content-related aspects of the three horror series to argue for manifestations of American fears following Abu Ghraib in other ways than merely focusing on the social anxiety of torture, such as *how* this onscreen torture was executed both visually and stylistically. The first section examines thematic elements of the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series including plot and character motivation to connect these movies to major points surrounding Abu Ghraib. By incorporating these thematic elements, torture porn recontextualized social issues following Abu Ghraib and presented them under the frequently denigrated guise of horror cinema for American audiences to confront. This is the more familiar role the horror genre has served throughout its history: referencing ideological crises of the time through allegory and interpretative methods. Torture porn fits into the annals of horror by continuing this tradition, yet also by implicitly referencing the specific social issues of a post-Abu Ghraib society.

The second section analyzes the stylistic techniques of the three torture series—with an emphasis on point-of-view and *mise-en-scène* — and how these choices not only contributed to the visceral impact of each text but also continued horror cinema's conventions by adapting them for audiences following Abu Ghraib. As Sipos (2010) discussed, "Understanding the techniques expands one's understanding of the horror genre […] and enhances an appreciation for the full creative potential" (p. 1). While it cannot be noted whether audiences comprehended these techniques, this study argues that the stylistic choices of the three torture porn series contributed to the subgenre's social relevance to a society debating the morality of torture.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE *SAW*, *HOSTEL*, AND *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE* SERIES

Before analyzing the major themes shared by these specific torture porn movies with issues raised by the Abu Ghraib photographs, it's important to note the filmmakers' motives with creating each of their controversial texts and, in the specific case of the two *I Spit on Your Grave* movies, the social context of these remakes compared to the context of the original 1978 movie of the same name. In a 2013 interview with *The Guardian*, *Hostel* director, screenwriter, and producer Eli Roth responded to a fan's question if he thought that torture porn movies such as his became relevant only after the release of the Abu Ghraib photos. Roth responded by asserting, "Horror films have a very direct relationship to the time in which they're made," very often tapping into social issues either consciously or unconsciously. In a later interview with *The Herald Scotland*, Roth stated that his films, released in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandals, were a statement on torture— but he stopped short of saying what *exactly* they were intended to say. "There were many political statements in *Hostel*. It's not for me to define. That's for the film scholars to find out" (2013).

In contrast, *Saw* director James Wan said almost nothing in regards to his horror film relating to ongoing societal events of the mid-2000s and particularly to the Abu Ghraib torture photographs. While Roth defended his film as socially relevant and cathartic (Jones, 2013, p. 87), Wan denies that *Saw* is a piece of social commentary (Benshoff, 2014). It's also worth noting that *Saw* completed production around September 2003 (*Variety*, 2004), well before the reveal of the Abu Ghraib photos in April of the next year, but it was released six months *after* these photos and in a social climate debating the morality of torture.

The *I Spit on Your Grave* movies (2010, 2013) are a unique aspect of this sample in that they are remakes based on a cult horror movie of the same name. The original *I*

Spit on Your Grave (1978) polarized audiences and sparked controversy with its rape-revenge narrative and gratuitous acts of violence. This incendiary film was so appalling that it prompted movie critic Roger Ebert to reward it zero stars and call it "a vile bag of garbage" (1980). As provocative as the original *I Spit on Your Grave* was in the late '70s (it made the notorious "Video Nasties" list of movies banned in Great Britain), it at least attempted to address very relevant social issues of the decade: rape, male chauvinism, as well as gender inequality and injustice. Audiences were polarized over the original text's audacious stance on female empowerment and it divided feminist circles; one side quickly wrote it off as misogynist, while the other applauded its rare depiction of a woman fighting back against her oppressors (Paszylk, 2009, p. 152). Although the two *I Spit on Your Grave* remakes do address similar issues, the feminist stance was not as central in critical and audience response. Instead, the lead character's brutal acts of torture took precedence over any metaphors of female empowerment because of the social context of these movies' release. The focus of the *I Spit on Your Grave* remake and its sequel was significantly altered towards its fictional torture as they were revamped for a society addressing the real acts of torture at Abu Ghraib.

Justified Torture

The photos of U.S. soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib were unsettling not only because of what they depicted, but also because of the issues they raised and forced Americans to confront— most noticeably, the issue of moral justification for torture. What if the torture resulted in the extraction of pertinent information that saved a life? Or led to Osama Bin Laden? Or even somehow contributed to the end of the War on Terror? Eisenman (2007) cited this as an extreme case of a desire for progress, or "the steady and implacable march toward betterment" (p. 116).

Sontag (2004) argues the photos were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done by using the War on Terror as rationalization. It may not have been right to torture the prisoners, but the U.S. military was "justified" because their actions were in service of a greater cause that took precedence over their breaks in virtue.

Justification of torture is a key theme in the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and especially the *I Spit on Your Grave* series. Consider the primary torturer of the *Saw* movies, John Kramer (Tobin Bell). John (aka Jigsaw) is a terminally ill elderly man that develops a new perspective on life upon his diagnosis. Although he now appreciates life, John also perceives many others as unworthy and ungrateful of their full lives. Cue the drug addicts, convicts, alcoholics, murderers, rapists, and crooked cops Jigsaw abducts and forces to play his deadly "game" of life or death.

In the first *Saw*, Lawrence (Cary Elwes) is an unfaithful doctor who must kill an invasive photographer (Leigh Whannell) or saw off his own leg in order to save the very family he wronged. As the story progresses, flashbacks reveal additional victims who played Jigsaw's game— of which only heroin-addict Amanda (Shawnee Smith) survived. *Saw II* expands the victim count to eight, and their crimes range from drug dealing and embezzlement to shoplifting and simply being the son of a crooked cop. *Saw III* advances this concept of "deserved" torture by having its central character, Jeff (Angus MacFadyen), encounter the handful of individuals responsible for the death of his son after he was killed by a drunk driver (including a reluctant eyewitness, the judge who sentenced the killer to only six months in prison, and of course, the killer himself). Though Jigsaw and Amanda, now converted as his apprentice, abducted and placed the victims in the traps, the central tension derives from Jeff deciding between forgiving the ones involved with his son's demise or allowing them to die a "justified" death. This

theme continues throughout the entire franchise, as Jigsaw claims to never directly kill any of his victims. Rather, he places them in dire situations where they must reevaluate their lives and endure self-torture to continue living. Though Jigsaw does not explicitly state it, he rationalizes his acts of torture because they involve ungrateful individuals who detract from society. After their ordeal, his victims will emerge as reborn and better individuals thanks to Jigsaw's torture.

Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2006) and *Hostel: Part II* (2007) take this notion of justified torture one step further to argue the concept of righteous torture, or torture with impunity. In the two movies, an underground organization known as the Elite Hunting Club abducts tourists in Europe and sells them to wealthy bidders, allowing them to fulfill their darkest fantasies of torture, maiming, and even murder. Both *Hostel* movies detail the bidding process of victims, where their passports are scanned into a system and wealthy men (and occasionally women) bid to fly to Eastern Europe and "rightfully" torture the person they now own. During these graphic scenes, the Elite Hunting Club staff members watch through video surveillance to ensure the torturers' fantasies go smoothly without interruption. Whereas Jigsaw of the *Saw* series feels justified in his torture of ungrateful victims, the torturers in the *Hostel* universe have the right to torture because they paid to do so without any repercussions.

Not only do these torturers feel justified or righteous in their acts, but the victims of both series also become torturers themselves in order to escape. A central narrative of *Saw II* centers on Detective Eric Matthews (Donnie Wahlberg) finding his son, whom Jigsaw has abducted and placed in a random house to play a "game." After Matthews' futile questioning, he physically assaults the elderly Jigsaw. This easily qualifies as torture, especially given that Jigsaw at this point is battling cancer and is in extremely poor health. Both of the lead characters of *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II*, Paxton (Jay

Hernandez) and Beth (Lauren German), respectively, escape and torture their former captors to ensure their freedom from the Elite Hunting Club. Paxton even goes so far as to hunt down the man that tortured and killed his friend, too. Upon seeing the man enter a restroom at a train station, Paxton follows and kills him in a bathroom stall and thus avenges his friend through justified torture (the torturer committed those same actions first, so when he himself is tortured it is his actions justifiably coming back to end him). Though Beth buys her way out of her ordeal in *Hostel: Part II*, she first castrates her captor and lets him bleed to death, then hunts down the woman that brought her and her friends to the Elite Hunting Club and decapitates her.

The victim-as-justified-torturer is the central premise of *I Spit on Your Grave* and its sequel. It should be noted that the central female characters of both films do not torture to escape their captors, but rather to exact merciless retribution upon the men that wronged them. The first two acts of *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) detail Jennifer's (Sarah Butler) merciless ordeal: four men beat and rape her in her cabin, they again beat and rape her in the woods, and moments before she is executed Jennifer manages to escape by rolling off a bridge and into a river. The third act of the movie is devoted to her revenge via meticulous stalking and torturing of these men in increasingly graphic manners. For example, after incapacitating Stanley (Daniel Franzese) with a bear trap, Jennifer punctures his eyelids open with fishhooks tied around a tree so that he cannot close his eyes during his punishment. Katie (Jemma Dallender) of *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (2013) is also sexually assaulted multiple times and inverses this torturer-victim relationship, such as when she abducts one of her rapists and tortures him to death using the same electroshock gun he used on her earlier. The core concept of the *I Spit on Your Grave* movies rests in these female leads' vengeful torture of the men who savagely and repeatedly beat and raped them. Though many viewers found the rape scenes excessive

and unnecessary, the barbarism of these assaults are intended to further justify Jennifer and Katie's equally violent retributions in the final act.

Like the U.S. soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the torturers of the three horror series and even the victims themselves tortured in the name of something greater. Jigsaw of *Saw* tortured only morally corrupt victims. The *Hostel* torturers paid for the right to execute their victims, and the victims that survived tortured to restore justice and escape the corrupt organization. For the female leads in both of the *I Spit on Your Grave* movies, their torture was pure and simple (justified) revenge. These motives serve as a manifestation of the torture in the Abu Ghraib photos in that the U.S. soldiers used "violence and torture in response to violence and torture to achieve some sense of justice in the world" (Wetmore, 2012, p. 107). Torture, in every case presented, was either justified, earned, or simply the "right thing to do."

Sexualized Torture

Despite the perception that the torture at Abu Ghraib was violent in a manner similar to the sadistic acts of maiming and physical harm associated with the *Saw* and *Hostel* series, the U.S. military's torture of Iraqi prisoners was largely centered on sexual mistreatment (Sontag, 2004; E. Morris, 2008; Hantke, 2010). Many photos prove this sexual abuse, such as one that depicts U.S. soldier Lynndie England in front of a line of naked, hooded prisoners as one is forced to masturbate in front of her. England then smiles for the camera and strikes a pose by putting both of her hands in the form of a gun aimed at the prisoner, insinuating that she's "shooting" him with her hands (Figure 2.1). In another photo, a prisoner is stripped naked, handcuffed to a bed, and forced to wear underwear over his face (Fig. 2.2.). Other photos similarly depict Iraqi prisoners stripped

down to their underwear or even completely naked, forced into sexual stress positions as members of the U.S. military watch, taunt, and sometimes laugh at their expense.

Figures 2.1-2.3: Examples of sexualized torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib

Though the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies are best known for their sustained acts of graphic and sadistic torture, both series also incorporate sexual torture that parallels the Abu Ghraib photos and taps into society's anxieties of this specific form of physical pain. Josh (Derek Richardson) of *Hostel* is stripped down to his underwear before he is brutally tortured and killed by a Dutch businessman. Viewers could also interpret homoerotic undertones to this torture, based on an earlier scene on a train in which the businessman suggestively touches Josh's leg. This undertone is further supported by Josh's sexual ambiguity throughout the movie. As his two male friends are participating in a drug-fueled group orgy, Josh scolds the pair for acting so primitive and not experiencing the country's culture. Despite later "accidentally" running into the businessman and making amends for the previous encounter, Josh is drugged and awakens in a dark room as the Dutch man tortures and penetrates him with various sharp tools. Lorna (Heather Matarazzo) of *Hostel: Part II* is tortured in a more explicitly sexual manner as she is gagged, bound, stripped naked, and held upside down over her female torturer (Figure 2.5). The mysterious woman, also naked, cuts Lorna multiple times and is clearly sexually aroused as she bathes in Lorna's dripping blood.

In the *Saw* series' only instance of full-frontal nudity, Danica (Debra McCabe) is punished for witnessing a child's death yet refusing to testify in court (*Saw III*, 2006). She is also stripped naked and chained (similar to *Hostel: Part II*) between two poles in a giant freezer room as ice-cold water sprays her at random intervals. Though she pleads with Jeff, the father of the dead son, to save her life, it is a futile attempt as water soon covers her entire body and she freezes to death. Josh's and Lorna's deaths in the *Hostel* series and Danica's death in *Saw III* tap into one of the main methods of torture as evidenced by the photos: stripped naked, hands bound, and killed in some sort of sexual position/manner.

The two *I Spit on Your Grave* movies again best exemplify this key theme shared with the Abu Ghraib photos. Since the movies are categorized under the "rape-revenge" horror subgenre, it is no surprise that sexualized torture is the primary method of inflicting pain. Not only do both Jennifer and Katie seek revenge against their rapists, but they seek to punish their oppressors in similarly sexual ways. After knocking Johnny (Jeff Branson) unconscious, Jennifer strips him naked and chains his limbs together so that he cannot move (Figure 2.6)—a prominent sexual theme in all three series. Since he forced her to perform fellatio on his pistol before raping her earlier in the movie, she forces him to do the same to his own gun before castrating him and leaving him to die. The sexual brutality of his death is only matched by Jennifer's punishment of Sherriff Howard (Andrew Miller), the leader of the group. Jennifer again matches his sexual torture to her ordeal suffered at his hands: because he sodomized her, she sodomizes him— with a shotgun. *I Spit on Your Grave 2* matches with equally sexualized punishments for the rapists, once again culminating in the most sexually graphic punishment reserved for group leader Ivan (Joe Absolom) as Katie sadistically crushes his testicles. This sequel also incorporates many of the sexual motifs of the Abu Ghraib

photos: Katie abducts Georgy (Yavor Baharoff), strips him down to his underwear, bounds his hands and legs, and places him into a stress position for extended periods of time as she periodically returns to check on him and ensure his suffering.



Figures 2.4-2.6: Characters stripped down or naked during their torture. (From left) Troy (J. LaRose) in *Saw III*; Lorna (Heater Matarazzo) in *Hostel: Part II*; Johnny (Jeff Branson) in *I Spit on Your Grave*

These reoccurring themes of forced nudity, restraint, and prolonged suffering are exploited in all three torture porn series to manifest American society's fears of and fascination with torture. The *Saw*, *Hostel*, and especially *I Spit on Your Grave* series tapped into these fears by combining both the assumed torture at Abu Ghraib (violence, maiming, executions) as well as the *actual* (sexually humiliating) torture at the prison. While the three torture series depicted and manifested similar sexual torture to that at Abu Ghraib, the films also incorporated another major shared theme: the specifically American torturers

Americans as Torturers

The photos from Abu Ghraib presented irrefutable evidence of what was really happening overseas, and they forced Americans to face an ugly truth: we can be the bad guys, too. Sontag (2004) discussed the Bush administration's inability to cope with this

revelation and their initial refusal to even mutter the word "torture," instead referring to Abu Ghraib prisoners as victims of "abuse" or "humiliation." She argues that to acknowledge our role as torturers would "contradict everything the [Bush] administration had invited the public to believe about the virtue of American intentions and America's right" (2004).

Both the Abu Ghraib photographs and the two *I Spit on Your Grave* movies raised a key question: "Is *either* person/group morally correct?" In both instances, a supposedly civilized individual or group of individuals resorts to sadistic acts of violence in response to a greater evil. By doing so, the morally superior side (i.e. the U.S. military; the female leads in the *I Spit on Your Grave* series) blurs the line between right and wrong and thus becomes interchangeable with their enemies. One of the most shocking aspects of the Abu Ghraib photos is the U.S. military's fall from grace, or rather, the military's fall from moral superiority. These soldiers embodied the desperation of a country at war by engaging in such violent and inhumane acts of torture, and this transition from civilized Americans to cruel torturers is exaggerated in the *I Spit on Your Grave* movies. These films center on two small, attractive, everyday women who are brutalized and sexually assaulted, then turn into unhinged sadists to exact their revenge. Adam Lippe (2011), professional critic for *Examiner.com*, noted the absurdity of the premise: "The scale here is so out-of-whack with what we're shown, with one battered, tiny girl devising and executing tortures that would have required several construction crews and a team of black ops agents." Also, perhaps these characters' lack of originality may contribute to the shock factor of the movies: Jennifer of *I Spit on Your Grave* is a writer seeking refuge at a cabin in the woods to overcome her writer's block, while in the sequel Katie verges on cliché as a cute yet naïve aspiring actress trying to make it big in New York. Just as the U.S. military were thought to represent the moral elite, the female leads of the *I Spit*

on Your Grave series represented completely average people who, like the soldiers, descended into moral ambiguity and sadism.

The *Saw* and *Hostel* movies not only depicted Americans torturing often innocent victims similar to the Abu Ghraib photos, but these movies challenged audiences to understand and even side with these torturers. Despite Jigsaw's death at the end of *Saw III*, he remained by far the most consistent and relatable character of the entire franchise (even continuing to appear in the following installments via flashbacks). In addition to the previously discussed argument of justified torture to better his victims, Jigsaw, an American, is developed not only as a torturer but also as a caring man who still loves his ex-wife, Jill. It's revealed in *Saw IV* that a drug-addicted thief robbed a rehabilitation center and slammed a door open on Jigsaw's then-pregnant wife Jill's stomach, resulting in a miscarriage. *Saw* challenges the audience to relate and sympathize with the torturer and understand him as more than his actions because Jigsaw, like the soldiers in the Abu Ghraib photos, is an American trying to make the world a better place through questionable actions.

A central torturer in the first *Hostel* movie is an American businessman (Rick Hoffman) who revels in his chance to torment an Asian woman (Jennifer Lim). After a conversation with Paxton, disguised as a fellow client, in which they discuss whether killing swiftly or slowly is more pleasurable, the American businessman reveals his true sadism and chooses to execute his victim slowly with a blowtorch to her eye. This American character drastically contrasts with Jigsaw in that the former is an exaggerated personification of evil. He is American, yet he is also a sadistic, twisted, and evil person who genuinely enjoys inflicting pain unto others.

Hostel: Part II presents antagonists that fall somewhere between this spectrum of relatable and intrinsically evil torturers. In addition to following three female American

college students in their journey and imminent ordeal throughout Eastern Europe, *Hostel: Part II* also dedicates ample time to the story of two American businessmen yearning for excitement and change in their lives. Once the girls are in the Elite Hunting Club's bidding system, Todd (Richard Burgi) and Stuart (Roger Bart) emerge the victors and soon travel to claim and torture their prizes.

Stuart's character arc is explored just as much, if not more, than Beth's (Lauren German), the rich, down-to-earth heroine of the movie. Through expository dialogue, Stuart divulges his dissatisfaction at home, lack of respect from his wife, and mounting debt awaiting his return. In the final act, Beth unintentionally reminds Stuart of his shortcomings and sets him off in a near-murderous rage. Because Stuart is a stronger developed and arguably more relatable character than Beth, the audience is challenged to identify with the torturer rather than with the victim.

Whether it was Jigsaw justifying his torture as moral reformation in *Saw*, *I Spit on Your Grave*'s female leads sexually torturing their rapists, or *Hostel*'s torturers as evil Americans, these three horror series incorporated major themes from the Abu Ghraib photographs in both implicit and explicit ways. By tapping into these key themes, the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* movies pushed the connection between the horror genre and ongoing social events to a level of more direct manifestation. Not only did these franchises exploit fears of torture through similar key themes, but they also exploited fears through cinematic techniques that encouraged viewer's sympathy and further complicated their identification with the "good" or "bad" sides.

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES AND AESTHETICS OF HORROR

The film techniques used in the three torture porn series are both significant and complex in their contribution to manifesting ongoing social anxieties, though these

techniques of viewer engagement and viewer identification are among the established conventions of the horror genre that have developed throughout its history. Arguably one of the most iconic examples of these techniques occurs in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which must be noted for the myriad ways it has influenced the horror genre— especially torture porn— since its theatrical release over half a century ago. *Psycho* tells the story of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), a "Phoenix secretary [who] steals $40,000 from her employer's client, goes on the run and checks into a remote motel run by a young man under the domination of his mother" (IMDb). Throughout the first half of the movie, the viewer is encouraged to identify with Marion because she is given narrative agency as the story unfolds from her perspective. However, Marion is unexpectedly killed in the classic shower scene that diverts the audiences' point-of-view from the protagonist to either her killer, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), or to the secondary characters, her sister Lila (Vera Miles) and Sam Loomis (John Gavin). Not only does *Psycho* develop tension with its story and atmosphere, but it also does so through this tug-of-war between the perspectives of the protagonists/victims and the killer himself. Though few earlier films had also played with point-of-view (such as *Peeping Tom*, also 1960, which depicted murders from the killer's perspective as he filmed them with his own camera), none had done so on such a sophisticated and innovative level as *Psycho*.

These cinematic techniques became even more pronounced in the "slasher" subgenre of the '70s and '80s with such movies as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Black Christmas* (1974), and *Friday the 13th* (1980). These movies are often noted for their distinguishable and iconic techniques, and one of the most recognized examples is the opening scene of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) in which the audience watches through a young Michael Myers' point-of-view as he observes, stalks, and kills his own sister. This continuous shot is particularly interesting for two reasons: it

establishes the subjective point-of-view as a motif, and it was conducted using Panavision's Panaglide, a rival to the (more successful) Steadicam. These long takes, which waver enough to keep the viewer unsettled, are unedited and allow audiences to become more immersed in the terror. As Emerson (2006) stated, these shots "suppress the artistic detachment that comes from mental montage, creating instead a direct involvement that— like real life— cannot be edited. The impact […] is visceral." The Panaglide allowed Director of Photography Dean Cundey to "wear" the camera and shoot one continuous shot outside, around, and inside of the Myers' house (Rodriguez, 2013), and this equipment contributed to viewers' identification with the killer as they experienced a murder from his perspective.

Clover (1992) asserted that each of these slasher films centered on a "Final Girl" (p. 35), a term widely used in reference to the horror trope of the last woman left alive to confront the killer and tell the story of survival. This Final Girl has many distinguishable traits: she is sexually unavailable and virginal, avoids vices that her friends engage in prior to their demises (e.g. premarital sex, underage drinking, and drug use), often possesses a unisex name (e.g. Ripley from *Alien*, 1979; Stretch from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, 1986), and she moves the narrative forward by exhibiting intelligence, curiosity, and vigilance. This Final Girl trope further developed with the emergence of what Clover calls the "double-axis revenge plot" (p. 115) of such films as *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). Each of these movies presented characters that survive an ordeal only to seek vengeance by retaliating against their tormentors in equally barbaric ways, such as Jennifer's (Camille Keaton) meticulous and graphic punishment for her rapists in *I Spit on Your Grave*. Similar to the opening scene of *Halloween,* these "double-axis" revenge plots complicated the relationship between victim and victimizer by prompting viewers to

question their identification with characters. (Note: *The Last House on the Left* is a unique case in that the Final Girl *does* die, yet her parents seek retribution for her against her killers.)

Playing with point-of-view and character identification are staples of the horror genre that have persisted throughout its history and made for some of the genre's most iconic moments, whether it's approaching a doomed swimmer in *Jaws* (1975) from the shark's point-of-view or the long tracking shots in *The Evil Dead* (1981) representing the attacking demonic forces. Though this convention developed with *Psycho* and coalesced in the slasher subgenre of the '70s, it continues to this day and was pushed even further in the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series as American viewers were invited into the role of torturer at a time when the morality of torture was widely debated. Thomas M. Sipos (*Horror Film Aesthetics*, 2010) analyzed how various cinematic tools have been used to effectively create horror on screen. His analytic approach is applied in this chapter to consider how film techniques of the three torture porn series not only effectively terrified audiences, but also tapped into social anxieties of torture by challenging viewers' identification with characters and recalling notable Abu Ghraib iconography such as the Hooded Man photo and comparable mise-en-scène to that of the dilapidated prison.

Point-of-View

In both *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II,* director Eli Roth cleverly utilizes different points of view to achieve immersive horror. In the first sequence of prolonged torture in the series, Josh (Derek Richardson) awakens in an unknown room with something obscuring his vision. Neither Josh nor the audience have any information, aside from what we see through his point-of-view of a hole pierced through the hood over his face.

The scene unfolds though this hole, and viewers discover information as Josh does: a light on the wall, some assortment of tools, and a man entering the room (Figure 2.7). By placing audiences in Josh's point-of-view during the torture, Roth creates an enhanced and personal terror that prompts viewers to identify with the victim.

Figure 2.7: Viewers placed in the point-of-view of a torture victim in *Hostel*

After Josh's hood is removed, it's revealed that the Dutch man from earlier encounters in the movie is the one responsible for his predicament. Despite Josh's pleas for mercy, the Dutch man meticulously tortures the hapless backpacker, yet he concludes the ordeal by opening the door to the room and allowing Josh to leave. As Josh stands up to exit, he stumbles to the floor after his achilles tendons tear open from his endured torture. Here, Roth again switches to Josh's point-of-view to make his harrowing escape even more dramatic. The viewer witnesses his stumble to the floor, and is immediately placed in Josh's ground-level view as he inches towards the door. The sequence cuts back and forth between Josh's perspective and the exit, and it concludes with the Dutch man blocking Josh's path and preventing his escape (Figure 2.8). As Sipos (2010) noted, subjective shots "encourage audience identification with the character whose POV we share" (p. 83). Thus, because this scene unfolds from Josh's point-of-view, audiences are encouraged to identify with this victim of torture at a time not only of war but also of moral debate over the U.S. military's similar acts of abuse at Abu Ghraib.

Figure 2.8: Viewers again placed in the point-of-view of a torture victim, this time during a futile escape attempt in *Hostel*

Film techniques in *Hostel: Part II* reverse which side the audience is on by using complex point-of-view shots that contribute to viewers' identification with the *torturers* rather than with the victims. In a series of shot-reverse-shots throughout the movie, Roth and cinematographer Milan Chadima place viewers in the point-of-view of the American torturers. First, Todd and Stuart study their soon-to-be victims at a local Slovakian festival, and we see parts of this scene unfold from their viewpoint (Figure 2.9). The audience identifies with the torturers as we see, from their perspective, the women dancing, unknowingly watched by the men that intend to kill them.

Figure 2.9: Gazing at the soon-to-be victims from the torturer's perspective in *Hostel: Part II*

The signature torture scenes in *Hostel: Part II* also provide key examples of point-of-view shots contributing to the audience's identification with the torturers. After over half of the movie is dedicated to buildup of the inevitable horrors, the *Hostel* sequel finally rewards its bloodthirsty viewers: Lorna (Heather Matarazzo) is abducted, chained upside down, and tortured. However, the technical choices of this scene make it much more interesting. Lorna, like the audience, is unaware of who will enter the room and what his/her intentions will be once they arrive. After waiting for what appears to be hours (a shot change implies passing of time and the room darkens), a door creaks open and the scene now unfolds from this person's POV. The camera slowly pushes in as the person approaches the hapless Lorna dangling above. In a shot-reverse-shot, this person is revealed to be a woman cloaked in a large robe, and she slowly walks toward Lorna (Figure 2.10). Viewers discover information in this scene when the female torturer enters, not only giving her power but also prompting audiences to identify with this torturer.

Figure 2.10: Point-of-view of a torturer in *Hostel: Part II*

Later, as the third act reaches a climax, we again follow a torturer and learn of information through his eyes: the details of the torture room, the weapons, and that Beth is now hooded and strapped to a chair awaiting her grisly demise (Figure 2.11). The audience learns as the torturer learns.

Figure 2.11: Viewers discover information along with Stu (Roger Bart) in *Hostel: Part II*

The cinematic techniques of the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series complicated which side viewers identified with through creative technical choices that often placed the audience in the perspective of torturers, thus making them identify with these persecutors. The Abu Ghraib photographs also prompted viewers to identify with the torturers, in this case the U.S. military that documented their inflicted torture from their viewpoint. These photos were particularly challenging because the American

public's other option was to identify with the Iraqi prisoners—which were largely simplified into one cohesive group as "the enemy." *Hostel* tapped into this fear through stylistic techniques that encouraged identification with the victim at a time when the Abu Ghraib photographs blurred the moral boundary between good and bad. By switching between the perspective of the victim and torturer, the *Hostel* series exploited this social fear of uncertainty regarding the U.S. military's role at Abu Ghraib. Though the soldiers irrefutably conducted the torture, believing they were at fault and their acts unwarranted would contradict the ethnocentric perception of American virtue in the War on Terror.

Mise-en-Scène

Mise-en-Scène is an abstract yet imperative term to understand for movies of any genre, and horror movies are no exception. It is a French film term translated as "putting on stage" or "putting into the scene" and includes everything before the camera, e.g. location, props, actors, set décor, costumes, lighting and makeup. Sipos (2010) noted that horror movies are often, though not always, low-budget projects, and the mise-en-scène of these movies is frequently more pragmatic than lazy. Ignoring their creative potential would be a mistake because, as Sipos argues, "the mise-en-scène *is* the film" (p. 31). He uses Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) as an example, specifically citing how the mise-en-scène contributed to the movie's establishment of a fictional universe. The spaceship in *Alien*, the Nostromo, has long, dark, and lonely passageways supporting the notion that the movie is a "haunted house on a spaceship" (p. 46). In a scene when Brett (Harry Dean Stanton) enters what could be a cargo hold, but appears more like a torture chamber, chains dangle from the ceiling and water showers down to complement the gritty ambiance of the room. The set décor, and other elements of *Alien*'s mise-en-scène, create the appearance of the classic horror setting of a dark torture room in this scene.

On a less iconic note, though one that contributes directly to this study, Sipos also analyzed how the mise-en-scène of *Hospital Massacre* (1981) addressed paranoid fears of doctors and hospitals in general (p. 45). Though a psycho killer is on the loose in *Hospital Massacre*, the greater threat is the hospital itself. Gruesome medical photos cover its walls, ominous shadows fill the long hallways, doctors toy with their scalpels, and the filthy, fumigated, and abandoned 9th floor is full of unknown medical horrors. Characters also enhance these fears, as Susan (Barbi Benton) encounters such hospital stereotypes as the physically invasive doctor and the inattentive nurse.

The mise-en-scène of both the Abu Ghraib photographs and the three torture porn series must be noted when examining their connections. In the case of the Abu Ghraib photos, notice not the people and their acts this time but rather their surrounding environment and its details (Figures 2.12-2.17).

Figure 2.12: The Hooded Man photo

Figures 2.13-2.17: Photos from Abu Ghraib of the torture environment

The photos detail an open, gritty, and unkempt space, only decorated by random items and smears along the wall and floor of unknown fluids (though Figure 2.17 clearly depicts blood). Aside from the bodies of both the soldiers and their prisoners, there is a minimalism to the setting. The U.S. military blend in with this bland environment as their brown uniforms and the prisoners' dark clothing match the drowned-out colors of the prison. The florescent lighting instills a brownish-green tint to the photos, perhaps emanating or reflecting off of the dull walls, that adds to the gritty realism of the torture that occurred in the prison.

The *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* Movies also incorporate similar aesthetic looks via their mise-en-scène. In perhaps the most iconic setting in the *Saw* franchise, two characters awaken in a dilapidated bathroom (Figure 2.18). This bathroom, like the Abu Ghraib prison, is poorly saturated as shades of blue, green, and brown illuminate the setting. There is minimal set décor to this bathroom, aside from broken

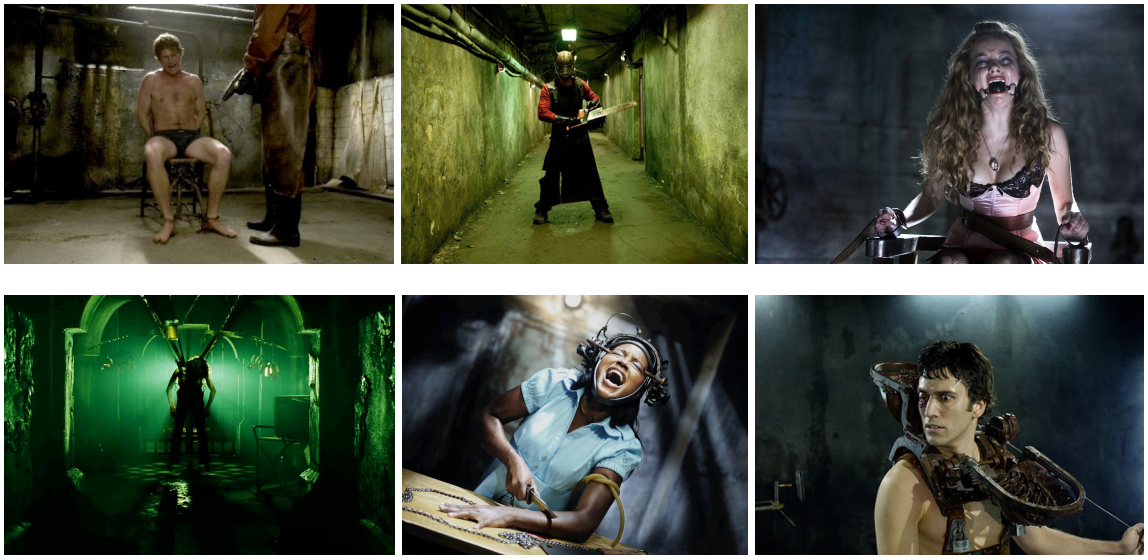
down and rusty appliances. The door is also slathered with something unknown, and fluids are again prominent— most noticeably, the blood that spills from the dead man in the center of the room.

Figure 2.18: A still of the bathroom—the primary setting— in *Saw*

As Sipos argues, "location may also mirror or symbolize a character's psychology" (p. 35). He provides the example of the protagonist in *White Noise* (2005) whose wife dies early in the film. This character then moves away from his warm, colorful house to a small, concrete, office-like condo that represents his internal emptiness and death. Similarly, the mise-en-scène of the three torture porn series, as well as the Abu Ghraib prison itself, serve as representations of not just the psychology of the people in those locations but also of the violent acts committed at each of the places. In the above image from *Saw*, the small, decrepit bathroom symbolizes the death that has and will occur in that location. It could also represent the mentalities of both characters as they're forced to fight for their lives via self-maiming and sacrifice. Similarly, Abu

Ghraib is far from lively and eccentric. The prison symbolizes the ordeal each of the prisoners suffered, with its raw, slum-like aesthetic that's enhanced by its muted colors and steel bars.

The settings of the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* movies provide noticeable similarities to the Abu Ghraib environment, especially during their signature scenes of prolonged torture. The mise-en-scène of these scenes in the *Hostel* (Figures 2.19-2.21) and *Saw* (Figures 2.22-2.24) series provide stark similarities to the decaying, cold appearance of the Abu Ghraib photographs.



Figures 2.19-2.24: Stills of the torture settings in *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II* (top row) and in the *Saw* series (bottom row)

Another aspect of mise-en-scène is *composition*. Notice that in each of these selected images, the person is located in the center. In Figure 2.20 from *Hostel*, Paxton has escaped his torturer and disguised himself to avoid recognition from the Elite Hunting Club. In this instance, Paxton is empowered by the camera framing him in the center of the image— or as Sipos (2010) wrote, the "power position" (p. 67). However, in

the rest of the photos provided above from the *Saw* and *Hostel* series, the camera frames the victims in the center to disempower them and properly depict their vulnerability in dire circumstances.

I Spit on Your Grave and *I Spit on Your Grave 2* also utilize minimalist and gritty set décor, as well as similar compositions, to address social fears of the real torture at Abu Ghraib. The images below from the movies provide another example of mise-en-scène that has been briefly addressed: *color*. Consistent in all three of the torture porn series in this sample, color is used to enhance the horror of the torture as it provides the settings with a cold, gritty look. The *Saw* and *Hostel* movies both heavily utilize tints of green and blue throughout the movies, and in the limited instances in which there are bright hues, they starkly contrast to the dead colors (see Figure 2.20 of Paxton and his red shirt contrasting with the earthly walls). The *I Spit on Your Grave* movies use the cold blue and the heavy green tint to enhance the sadistic acts of torture (Figures 2.25 and 2.26), similar to how the Abu Ghraib environment heightened those acts of torture with its equally drab appearance.

Figures 2.25: A screenshot from a torture scene in *I Spit on Your Grave*

Figure 2.26: A screenshot from *I Spit on Your Grave 2* of the torture environment

Mise-en-scène is an imperative concept to consider when examining movies of any genre, and it is especially relevant when analyzing cinema's connection with and manifestation of ongoing social issues. These three horror series incorporated similar mise-en-scène elements of the Abu Ghraib photos such as setting (open, dilapidated environments), set décor (unkempt, stained), and color (cold, pale hues) to tap into audience's fears of the real torture that occurred overseas. While these elements more directly manifested social anxieties via visual similarities, the following chapter discusses how torture porn incorporated Abu Ghraib iconography and what these images symbolized in their post-Abu Ghraib social context

Chapter 3: Paratextual Analysis of Abu Ghraib Iconography & Torture Porn Marketing

The "Hooded Man" photo, which is arguably the most iconic image to emerge from Abu Ghraib, depicts an Iraqi prisoner hooded and standing on top of a box with electrical wires wrapped around his hands. This visual motif of a hooded victim not only reappeared in other photos, but also in post-Abu Ghraib horror cinema— specifically, in the torture porn series *Saw* and *Hostel*. Though the hooded victim is the most iconic image, there are other visual similarities between Abu Ghraib and these two franchises: the uniforms worn by U.S. military at the prison compared with those worn by torturers in *Saw* and *Hostel*; the stark visual similarities of the victims' sexualized stress positions, especially in the *I Spit on Your Grave* series; and the visual motif of a box at Abu Ghraib compared with visual motifs of the torture porn movies. By prominently utilizing and playing with Abu Ghraib iconography, one might argue that the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series triggered American audiences' visual memory of the photos and thus manifested societal fears of torture— though it cannot be irrefutably proven what American audiences were thinking when observing these texts. The first section of this chapter examines the ways in which each of the three torture series incorporated Abu Ghraib iconography, which differs from the previous chapter on visual similarities in that iconography refers to "the question of representation and hidden meanings of images" (Jewitt and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 92). Whereas chapter 2 analyzed the ways the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* movies tapped into social fears of torture through allegory and stylistic methods, this section examines how iconic imagery such as the Hooded Man were symbols for unsettled social issues in a post-Abu Ghraib context.

This torture iconography also extended far outside the movie theater through such paratextual materials as movie posters and trailers that permeated daily American life.

Paratexts, according to Gray (2010), "surround texts, audiences, and industry, as organic and naturally occurring [in] a part of our mediated environment" (p. 23) that frame the main text and can change its reception or interpretation by the public. People who had no intent of seeing these movies, or even those that were unaware of this commercially successful horror subgenre, must have found it difficult to avoid torture imagery due to Lionsgate's aggressive marketing for the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies and Anchor Bay Entertainment's equally ambitious promotion for both of the *I Spit on Your Grave* films. Whether it was a billboard off the freeway of a naked woman dangling upside down or a 30-second television trailer addressing the viewers as torturers ("There's a place […] where you can torture…"), Abu Ghraib iconography saturated public and even private spaces during torture porn's prime in the mid-to-late 2000s. The second section of this chapter examines how the graphic marketing of these movies, i.e. their trailers and posters, strongly suggested torture at a time when this same concept caused ideological crises following the revelation of the photographs from Abu Ghraib.

ABU GHRAIB ICONOGRAPHY

The Hood

The mask is perhaps one of horror cinema's most iconic visual tropes that has persisted throughout the decades and shifting trends of the genre, though it is far more prevalent in horror films following *Psycho* (1960). Whether it's Leatherface's flesh mask from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) or Jason Voorhees' hockey mask from the *Friday the 13th* (1980) franchise, the mask is a recognizable and fear-provoking visual. Sipos (2010) argues that the mask is particularly frightening because it empowers killers by rendering them anonymous, which he calls the "inhuman effect" (p. 63). This effect is

especially terrifying because of the disconnect created by obscuring the killer's eyes, depersonalizing him as a threatening and even soulless individual.

Obscuring the eyes is equally as powerful on a horror movie victim. Sipos (2010) further argues that horror is an emotive genre in which audiences are meant to empathize with, and fear for, the victims (p. 5), and one of the ways this is achieved is by obscuring *their* eyes as well through the use of a hood. A dominant theme in the photos from Abu Ghraib is of the Iraqi prisoners not only in humiliating and often painful positions, but in these positions with their vision obscured (Figures 3.1-3.3).

Figures 3.1-3.3: Hooded Iraqi prisoners

The mask/hood trope of the *Saw* and *Hostel* series and Abu Ghraib photographs is one of the most distinctive visual parallels between the two, and the Hooded Man photo is a clear example of this trope. Because the viewer of this photo cannot look into the man's eyes and see his pain, suffering, and embarrassment, the man instead appears inhuman and even monstrous. Ironically, the viewer is more likely to identify with the U.S. soldier fidgeting with a camera in the foreground because his face is at least partially visible in the unedited version of the photo (Figure 3.3.). This visual trope reappears throughout the Abu Ghraib photographs— evidenced by the above examples— as the U.S. military hooded many prisoners during their torturous acts. Though most pictures show prisoners with standard hoods, others were forced to wear their own underwear in lieu of an actual hood— perhaps yet another example of sexualized torture at Abu

Ghraib, or, more practically, because the soldiers ran out of hoods for the victims and improvised with what they could. This hooded victim iconography was so prominent that Time magazine published a sketched image of a hooded Iraqi prisoner on the cover of its May 17, 2004 issue titled, "Iraq: How Did It Come to This?" (Fig. 3.4).

Figure 3.4: The May 17, 2004 issue of TIME magazine

The victims in *Saw* and *Hostel* are often hooded as well. *Hostel* characters such as Josh, along with his female counterparts Whitney and Beth of *Hostel: Part II,* find themselves hooded moments before their painful ordeal. The hoods are similar to those used at Abu Ghraib, and the victims are often similarly stripped down and placed in drab, gritty environments. A still from Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) provides striking visual

similarities to the Hooded Man photo in which both subjects are hooded and in vulnerable positions with another man (in uniform) standing nearby (Figures 3.5 and 3.6).

Figures 3.5 and 3.6: A side-by-side visual comparison of the iconic Hooded Man photo from Abu Ghraib (left) and a torture scene in *Hostel* (right)

Though the *Hostel* series more bluntly recalls this iconography by covering similarly ill-fated characters in hoods, the *Saw* series puts a unique visual spin on the trope. In *Saw* (2004), Amanda (Shawnee Smith, Fig. 3.7) awakens in a darkened room with a mechanical device around her head and attached to her jaw. The television in front of her turns on and a video informs her that she has 60 seconds to retrieve the key from the stomach of her cell mate and unlock the device, but if she fails, the device will spring backwards like a "reverse bear trap" and rip her head off. Amanda is not only presented with a hood, but one with life-or-death consequences: remove the "hood" in 60 seconds or suffer a brutal and painful death. Other characters in the *Saw* series also face a life-or-death hood: Michael (Noam Jenkins) of *Saw II* (2005) must retrieve a key from behind his eye or fall victim to a "Venus fly trap" device around his head (Fig. 3.8), and Simone (Tanedra Howard) of *Saw VI* (2009) is strapped with a mechanism around her head that will kill her if she does not sacrifice more flesh than her coworker (Fig. 3.9). The *Saw* series personalizes the Abu Ghraib iconography of a hooded victim by presenting the

hood as the instrument of torture that, rather than simply obscuring vision, inflicts pain as well.



Figures 3.7-3.9: "Hooded" *Saw* victims in life-or-death situations

Uniforms

Sontag (2004) analyzed how the Abu Ghraib photographs not only shattered the American perception of righteousness in the war, but also how these photos represented a shift in the use of pictures. Specifically, Sontag argues that these photos were messages taken by the U.S. military as "trophy shots" with the intent of dissemination (2004). She also pointed out a rare and distinguishing trait of the photos: the torturers have placed themselves among their victims (Figures 3.10-3.12). An earlier example showed a U.S. soldier in the foreground of the Hooded Man photo, and some of the other most disturbing photos depict U.S. soldiers giving visual cues of approval.



Figures 3.10-3.12: U.S. soldiers alongside their victims in photographs from Abu Ghraib

Since the soldiers are evident in many of the photos, one can readily identify their military uniform. The uniforms, usually consisting of a brown or forest green shirt,

military camouflage pants, and matching boots, visually distinguish the soldiers from the prisoners— the latter of which are often stripped naked and/or bleeding in addition to the stress positions they were forced to endure. The military uniforms provided a sense of visual unity amongst the torturers, as they're all similar in contrast to the visual similarities of the dirtied, injured and hooded prisoners.

The torturers in *Hostel* (2005) and *Hostel: Part II* (2007) also wear uniforms that visually distinguish them from their victims, similar to the soldiers at Abu Ghraib. In the two movies, an underground organization known as the Elite Hunting Club abducts tourists in Europe and sells them to wealthy bidders so that they can fulfill their darkest and most violent fantasies. The Elite Hunting Club also enforces that torturers dress in uniform: a blood-red long sleeve shirt under a darkly opaque apron with a utility belt to hold torture devices, black gloves, pants, and boots (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13: Torturers' wardrobe in the *Hostel* movies

Similar to how the soldiers in the Abu Ghraib photographs are visually united with their matching uniforms, the torturers in the *Hostel* movies are also shown as one cohesive unit simply by their matching clothing. Though this wardrobe isn't explicitly similar to that of the U.S. military, it still provides a stark visual identification for the torturers compared to the stripped-down and often dirty or bloody appearance of the

victims. *Hostel* audiences saw the torturers as an organized group via their matching wardrobe in representation of a professional organization, thus presenting these fictional torturers in a visually unified manner that symbolized the U.S. military and their comparable acts of mistreatment at Abu Ghraib.

Sexualized Stress Positions

As discussed in the earlier "Major Themes" section of this study, it was largely perceived that the torture at Abu Ghraib was violent in a manner similar to the sadistic acts of a horror movie. But the U.S. military's torture of Iraqi prisoners was mostly centered on sexual abuse and mistreatment (Sontag, 2004; E. Morris, 2008; Hantke, 2010) such as forcing prisoners to perform sexual acts on one another, exposing their naked bodies, and even holding uncomfortable stress positions as soldiers stood nearby. These stress positions are evident in many photographs (Figures 3.14-3.16). American soldiers forced Iraqi prisoners into these sexualized stress positions and instructed them to hold these contortions for extended periods of time, which can create "an intense amount of pressure on parts of the body, and can lead to muscle failure" (*TheDay.com*, 2014). These stress positions often included prisoners' hands bound via handcuffs or rope, and in other instances their hands were cuffed to immovable items such as cell bars, but in all cases the prisoners were restrained into ways that twisted their bodies into uncomfortable and often sexually humiliating positions. These positions lasted on average eight to ten hours and sometimes caused prisoners to pass out from the ordeal (E. Morris, 2008).

Figure 3.14 (left): Photo from Abu Ghraib of a prisoner in a stress position

Figures 3.15 and 3.16 (below): More photos from Abu Ghraib of prisoners in stress positions

Though this study has already argued both Abu Ghraib and torture porn movies shared the *theme* of sexualized torture, this subsection focuses on the *visual* similarities between both cases of torture. For example, the rape-revenge horror movie *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) and its sequel *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (2013) provide stark visual similarities to Abu Ghraib in its depiction of sexual torture. Since both movies implicitly argue that the protagonists are justified in their retribution against their rapists, these female characters ensure that their revenge matches their ordeal: sexual, painful torture. In *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), Jennifer (Sarah Butler) exacts retribution on the leader of her rapists, Sherriff Storch, by raping him with a shotgun and tying the string from the trigger to a different unconscious rapist. After prolonged excruciating pain and humiliation (like at Abu Ghraib), Sherriff Storch is killed when his fellow rapist awakens and triggers the shotgun. In another, more iconographically similar instance to Abu

Ghraib, the (different) protagonist of *I Spit on Your Grave 2* lures one of her rapists to the sewers and suspends him from the wall by his arms (Figure 3.19). After smearing fecal matter in his wounds and torturing him with a switchblade, the "heroine" decides to simply leave the man to die rather than grant him an end to his misery. This scene combines two important visual aspects of the sexual torture at Abu Ghraib: naked, physical restraining (Figure 3.17) and bodily fluids (Figure 3.18).

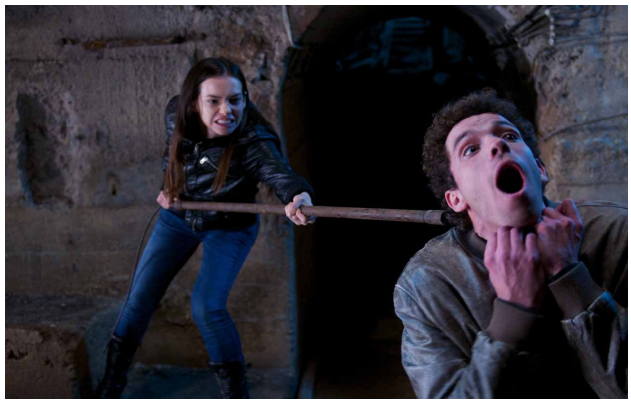
Figures 3.17-3.19: Photographs of sexualized torture from Abu Ghraib (left, center) compared with a still from *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (right)

Similarly, Danica of *Saw III* also endures an ordeal involving restraint, nudity, and fluids (Figure 3.20).

Figure 3.20: A woman is stripped naked and tortured with freezing water in *Saw III*

In one of the most explicitly and visually identical sexual torture scenes, Katie (*I Spit on Your Grave 2*) restrains her victim by choking him around his neck (Figure 3.22).

Katie, positioned in a higher and therefore stronger stance than her victim, controls the man as he is forced into submission. This draws a strong likeness to the infamous photo of Lynndie England "walking" a prisoner on a leash (Figure 3.21). In both instances, a



small woman subdues a man via a "leash" that chokes and tortures him.

Figures 3.21 and 3.22: A side-by-side visual comparison of a prisoner's torture at Abu Ghraib (left) and a character's torture in *I Spit on Your Grave* (right)

A visual examination of the characters and their physical positions provides additional insight into the power dynamics of both the torture porn movies and the Abu Ghraib photos. Eisenman (2007) conducted a visual analysis of Leon Golub's painting titled *Interrogation II* (1981) in which a hooded figure is naked and bound by rope to a chair as four men stand near him— one of which appears to be grabbing the victim's head. Eisenman dissected how the physical positioning of the victim and his torturers reinforces the position of power between the two. Specifically, Eisenman noted the position of the seated victim in contrast to the "angular athleticism" of the torturers (p. 107). Though Eisenman's inspection involves a painting, his points are useful and can be applied in the context of comparing visual similarities between Abu Ghraib prisoners and torture porn victims. Similar to the painting, both sets of victims are frequently at lower

eye level than their torturers, reinforcing the "angular athleticism" Eisenman described in *Interrogation II*. For example, the stress position photos discussed earlier (Figures 3.14-3.16) all have the prisoners at a lower eye level— either because they were forced into a physically lower position, or the photographer was simply a taller person. Regardless of the reasoning, the soldiers are in a superior position as they (and any viewers of these photographs) literally look down on the prisoners, implying a position of power and control over the situation. This visual power dynamic is evident in nearly every torture scene of the three movie series in this sample. The victim is often hooded and bound, sitting in a chair as the torturer walks in and asserts his/her dominance through their physical positioning. In most of the earlier provided examples from the torture porn films, especially the *Saw* and *Hostel* series, this visual power dynamic contributed to these movies' exploitation of audience's fears of real torture by tapping into—whether intentional or not—Abu Ghraib iconography from the published photographs.

Visual Motifs

A motif is defined as "something that recurs in a film […] with an aesthetic intent or effect" that serves to reinforce a message or theme (Sipos, 2010, p. 39). In addition to the iconic hoods as a reoccurring image, another visual motif in the Abu Ghraib photographs is a box. Shaw (2006) pointed out that the boxes used for the electric torture procedure is "routinely visible" in multiple other photos (Figures 3.25 and 3.26). This visual motif establishes a connection between the photos, linking the images with the placement of the box in the background or as a prop that the prisoners reluctantly held before their torment. Note the following images in which the boxes used for the electrode torture reappear across multiple photos.

Figure 3.23-3.26: (top row) the box in photos of torture; (bottom row) Photos from Abu Ghraib, edited by *The Huffington Post* to emphasize the box motif

Figure 3.23 elaborates on the Hooded Man's ordeal, and Shaw noted this provides context for the iconic electric torture photo: "the prisoner had to be led into the room; the door needed to be secured (perversely accomplished here with something resembling an American flag); he needed to be hooded and hooked up to the wires, and a box had to be placed to stand on" (2006). According to several released prisoners, this electroshock procedure was administered regularly, so the mere sight of this box, much less having to hold it, undoubtedly added to the degradation the prisoners experienced both mentally and physically.

The three horror series also incorporate visual motifs pertaining to torture. In the *Saw* movies the antagonist, Jigsaw, carves a puzzle piece out of his victims' bodies if they fail one of his tests. As Jigsaw explains to Detective Matthews (Donnie Wahlberg) in *Saw II*, "The jigsaw piece I cut from my subjects was only ever meant to be a symbol that that subject was missing something— a vital piece of the human puzzle— the survival instinct" (2005). Though this motif is less utilized in the sequels, it does make a prominent appearance in the first *Saw* after the detectives find it carved into a dead man's back. There is another more explicit and consistent visual motif in the *Hostel* series that also symbolizes the torturers' brutal acts. Upon joining the Elite Hunting Club, torturers are required to get a tattoo of a bloodhound to officially induct them into the secret group. This motif could be read simply as a requirement of Elite Hunting Club manager Sasha Rassimov (Milan Knazko) because of his affinity for bloodhounds, or it could be read to symbolize a comparison between the keen hunting skills of a bloodhound with the hunting skills of the torturers who pay to fulfill their darkest fantasies.

Figure 3.27: The bloodhound motif in *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II*

Just as the visual motifs in these torture porn series can be interpreted in many different ways, so too can the box motif in the Abu Ghraib photos. The mere sight of the box represented impending doom for the prisoners, as Shaw (2006) discussed, but the box itself can also be seen as a visual similarity with torture porn cinema in that it

represents the trademark of torturers. In the context of Abu Ghraib, the U.S. military used the box as their visual equivalent of the jigsaw puzzle piece from *Saw* (2004) or the bloodhound tattoo from *Hostel* (2005). The box serves the important purpose of tying together the narrative of torture at Abu Ghraib and it visually symbolizes the torture and humiliation performed by the U.S. military.

The iconography discussed thus far is imperative to consider for its symbolic meanings and potential interpretations in regards to the real torture at Abu Ghraib, but these loaded images were not restricted to only die-hard horror fans and viewers willing to stomach the sadistic and relentless violence of torture porn. As discussed in the opening of this chapter, Abu Ghraib iconography permeated the public sphere via torture porn's movie posters and trailers that prominently conveyed, or at least strongly suggested, the concept of torture in its imagery to casual onlookers and fervent fans of the subgenre alike. The following section analyzes how the marketing tactics of the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series encouraged viewers to address this relevant issue of torture at a paratextual level through these movies' graphic posters and suggestive trailers.

MARKETING OF THE *SAW*, *HOSTEL*, AND *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE* SERIES

The core concept of torture porn is, of course, the graphic, violent and sadistic ordeal that is torture. Accordingly, the promotional materials for the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series tested social boundaries with blatant depictions of violence and images of characters in pain. Noting the effective brutality of *Saw*'s promotion, critic Bill Muller remarked, "*Saw* is a marketing campaign in search of a movie" (*Arizona Republic*, 2004). This is the very nature of exploitation filmmaking, dating back to Roger Corman's B movies for American International Pictures (e.g. *The Undead*, 1957; *X: The*

Man with the X-Ray Eyes, 1963; and *The Dunwich Horror*, 1970) that were transgressive in their handling of disreputable content such as sex and violence. Exploitation films also often present this content in a titillating manner, which best explains the label "torture porn" and its juxtaposition of two words denoting violence and sexual stimulation. Torture porn, however, distinguished itself from exploitative horror subgenres of previous decades with the social relevance of its core concept in a post-Abu Ghraib society. Torture wasn't only something to fear in these movies, but it was also something to fear in reality—and that changes the nature of what exactly the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* movies exploited in their posters and trailers entirely.

Trailers

The trailers for the three series heavily emphasize the aspect of torture and feature victims crying in pain in dark, isolated rooms. The first *Saw* trailer frequently depicts two men in a dilapidated bathroom, instructed to cause physical harm to one another and later to themselves ("He doesn't want us to cut through our chains… he wants us to cut through our feet"). This is intercut with other scenes of torture, such as Amanda's "reverse-bear trap" on her head and a man crawling through barbed wire. The rest of the *Saw* series continued to feature torture at the forefront of their trailers in a variety of manners. The trailer for *Saw II* (2005) begins by recounting what happened in the first film, again showing the carnage and maiming that occurred in the decrepit bathroom. This trailer also focuses on the new Rube Goldberg-like traps that creatively execute Jigsaw's victims, and it establishes the expanded victim count to include a house full of former convicts. After teasing scenes of torture, the *Saw II* trailer ends with this suggestive tagline: "Oh yes… there will be blood." The *Saw III* (2006) trailer ends with Jigsaw muttering a similarly sinister line: "Suffering… you haven't seen anything yet.

At this point in the franchise, the *Saw* movies had established themselves as part of a graphic torture-horror series that tested the audience's endurance for prolonged scenes of violence. As a result, the *Saw V* trailer featured nothing more than a tease for Agent Strahm's (Scott Patterson) torture intercut with titles such as, "His [Jigsaw's] message is righteous." This is perhaps one of the most palpable examples of the *Saw* series tapping into Abu Ghraib anxieties as it supports the earlier theme of the U.S. military's arguably justified torture in the name of war. The *Saw VI* trailer focuses less on the torture itself than on the location of the torture, providing viewers with a virtual tour through expectedly dark, decrepit, and bloodied rooms (Figure 3.28) that are littered with tropes that have become associated with such torture-horror movies as *Saw* (e.g. a surgeon's table, a variety of sharp surgical tools, a chair in the center of a dimly lit room, and even a bathroom as an homage to the first *Saw* movie).

Figure 3.28: Stills from the trailer for *Saw VI* showing torture settings

Lastly, it should be noted that all of the trailers for the *Saw* movies are shorter than the standard two-and-a-half minute length, and as the series progressed the trailers grew even shorter in duration. The first *Saw* trailer lasted almost two minutes, while *Saw III* through *Saw 3D: The Final Chapter* had trailers that were only one minute long. This arguably testifies to an earlier point that the *Saw* series established a reputation for

depicting torture that audiences had become familiarized with through screenings and paratextual materials, and by extent, that *Saw* had noticeably saturated public spaces with the issue of torture at the same time Western society encountered the same concept following Abu Ghraib.

The trailers for *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II* increased the intensity by not only strongly suggesting graphic scenes of torture, but by also placing viewers in the role of torturer. The first *Hostel* trailer shows pliers lowered onto a woman's toes before cutting to black and hearing a scream, then directly addresses the viewer as if they were a torturer: "There is a place where your darkest, sickest fantasies are possible. Where you can experience anything you desire. Where you can torture, punish, or kill… for a price" (2005). The *Hostel: Part II* trailer matches this by ending with a scythe running down a woman's back as she pleads for her life, then again addresses the viewer as a torturer: "Russian men can be cheap. Mexicans can be worth more than Canadians. But if you want [to torture] an American girl… that will cost you" (2007). These scenes are intercut with other graphic depictions such as surgical tools, fingers clawing against a wall, characters gagged and bound, and even the torturers themselves. Similar to the stylistic move discussed earlier of placing viewers in the torturer's point-of-view, these trailers also challenged audiences' identification with characters by addressing them in the same superior role of torturer like the U.S. military at Abu Ghraib.

Like with *Saw* and *Hostel*, the trailers for *I Spit on Your Grave* and *I Spit on Your Grave 2* combined teasing viewers with suggestions of torture and outright showcasing these graphic acts. Trailer 1 for the first *I Spit on Your Grave* conveys the rape-revenge premise and provides only glimpses of Jennifer's torture of her rapists. However, this trailer ends with a clear look at Johnny (Jeff Branson) bound and suspended by rope as he bleeds and cries with Jennifer angrily standing in front of him. She then raises a pair of

hedge trimmers and exclaims, "It's date night." Trailer 2 for this same movie showcases more of the torture, this time in a montage intercut with suggestive and graphic words such as, "Unflinching […] Unforgiving […] Unmerciful […] Unrelenting […] Unleashed." The trailer also similarly ends on a clear view of a character's brutal ordeal— this time it's cameraman Stanley's punishment for his voyeurism during Jennifer's rape as his eyes are forced open with fish hooks. Lastly, both of these trailers also address the key Abu Ghraib issue of justified torture as they include the line, "There are some crimes so brutal… that if you survive, the only justice is revenge."

By strongly featuring these graphic aspects of torture in the trailers and addressing viewers in the role of a torturer, Lionsgate's marketing strategies for the *Saw* and *Hostel* movies and Anchor Bay Entertainment's marketing for *I Spit on Your Grave* and its sequel not only sold the movies but told us how to read them as well. Specifically, even those who did not watch any movies of the three torture series still "watched" them at a paratextual level. Peter Debruge (*Variety*, 2007) aptly addressed this point in his review of *Saw* by noting, "given Lionsgate's unusually graphic advertising campaign, no one stumbles into a movie like this unaware." To expand on Debruge's point, no one stumbles into *Saw*, *Hostel*, or *I Spit on Your Grave* unaware because of these movies' effective permeation of the public sphere with torture-related imagery and video clips. Put into the social context of these movies' release, the three torture porn series tapped into ideological crises following Abu Ghraib by presenting and exploiting these images of torture to unsettled Western audiences.

Movie Posters

Though the trailers were largely responsible for promoting these torture texts and their brutal premises, they're avoidable and are not as ubiquitous as movie posters. That

is, you can stop a trailer or avoid it by not watching horror movies, but you see countless posters simply by attending the movie theater or on public billboards while driving on the highway. In an article for the horror website *Dread Central*, Steven Barton (2014) discussed 17 controversial horror movie posters that were banned from public display, and the fact that *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* posters are included in this list testifies to the extremity of these series' marketing. The *Saw* series was the first of the three franchises to ignite public scrutiny in 2004 with its posters, and critic Wesley Morris (*Boston Globe*) discussed in his *Saw* review that much of the anticipation was "generated from wondering whether the movie [would] deliver on the promise of its posters" (2004). As Barton noted, the MPAA frequently rejected the "gruesome imagery" of these promotional materials. Specifically, the MPAA rejected a poster for *Saw II* depicting two severed fingers (Figure 3.29), forcing Lionsgate to revise the poster and only imply the physical detachment (Strong, 2004). Without context, these posters may appear as uninspired scenes of violence that are common in the horror genre. However, when viewed in a post-Abu Ghraib social context, such images as the *Saw V* poster of a man in chains (Fig. 3.32) suggesting torture serve a greater and more relevant purpose.

Figures 3.29-3.32: Graphic posters for the *Saw* movies

Lionsgate further tested the American public, and the MPAA, to see what is deemed socially unacceptable with their *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II* promotional posters. As with *Saw*, these posters immediately convey the concept of torture with only a quick glance: a rusty yet sharp weapon (Fig. 3.33); a man handcuffed to a knocked-over chair with a blood-smeared background (Fig. 3.34); a woman upside down, gagged and crying (Fig. 3.35). In what instinctively appears to be the most grotesque poster of all three series, Lionsgate released a promotional image of slaughtered meat for *Hostel: Part II* (Fig. 3.36). Though the MPAA approved this poster, much to the elation of writer/director Eli Roth, the theater chain Century/Cinemark objected it as "ruthless" and prohibited staff from putting it up in their theaters (Barton, 2014). The poster depicting a naked woman holding a decapitated woman's head (Fig. 3.37) was also controversial for its implied violence, and this image even more prominently tapped into Abu Ghraib torture by incorporating specifically sexual violence. Though this poster does not specify how the woman met her demise, the juxtaposition of nudity and violence in the years following Abu Ghraib conveyed a realistic and grounded horror that separated torture porn films like *Hostel: Part II* from other post-9/11 horror movies.

Figures 3.33-3.37: Posters for *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II*

The posters for *I Spit on Your Grave* and *I Spit on Your Grave 2* best utilized this combination of sexuality and violence. Noting the effectiveness of the poster for the original *I Spit on Your Grave* (Figure 3.38), Barton (2014) wrote, "its impossible to think about the film without picturing the rear-end of a knife-wielding woman." The remake and its sequel utilized this iconic image (Figures 3.39-3.41) to effectively convey the brutal aspects of these rape-revenge movies: though the women are battered and exposing instruments of death and torture, their exposed bodies and meticulously-placed clothing appropriately communicate the controversial premise. These posters were also deemed inappropriate and banned from public spaces, though in this instance it was more related to the sexualization of a raped woman rather than the implied violence.

Figures 3.38-3.41: Posters for the *I Spit on Your Grave* series; (from left) the 1978 original, its 2010 remake, and two posters for *I Spit on Your Grave 2*

Lionsgate's promotional material for the *Saw* and *Hostel* series ensured that all prospective viewers knew what to expect from these movies: graphic, prolonged sequences of torture and sexual violence. In the case of the two *I Spit on Your Grave* films, the posters effectively and succinctly conveyed the core rape-revenge premise by contrasting the sexuality of the victims with their implied revenge via inflicted torture

and suffering. The trailers for the three horror series emphasized this pain through strong insinuations of the specific torture the characters would endure (e.g. barbed wire in *Saw*; cutting off toes in *Hostel*; a man's castration by hedge trimmers in *I Spit on Your Grave*), and the posters elaborated by providing still images such as suffering characters or weapons of torture to pique audiences' fears. By marketing the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* movies with torture at the forefront, Lionsgate and Anchor Bay Entertainment not only continued the horror tradition of exploitative filmmaking but also differentiated the three torture porn series from its predecessors by centering on the very real and ongoing threat of torture in a post-Abu Ghraib society. However, what truly distinguished these series is that they were able to exploit these social anxieties of torture through graphic and suggestive paratextual materials that provided viewers the opportunity to address this topic without even stepping foot in a theater.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Horror cinema, in particular the torture porn subgenre, was not Hollywood's only attempt at representing 9/11 and the War on Terror through allegorical onscreen manifestations. Though few movies were made specifically about the terrorist attacks (e.g. *United 93*, 2006; *World Trade Center*, 2006), many more films depicted the U.S. military immersed in the Middle East fighting terrorism or members of the U.S. government engaged in political issues pertaining to the War on Terror. Most of these war films were box office failures. *Home of the Brave* (2006), *Grace is Gone* (2007), and *The Messenger* (2009) all centered on soldiers during or after the Iraq war and domestically grossed $1.1 million or less (Box Office Mojo). *Rendition* (2007), which doesn't explicitly mention Abu Ghraib but does examine the morality of torture through extraordinary rendition, grossed $9.7 million. And *Lions for Lambs* (2007) proved that not even the star-studded cast of Tom Cruise, Meryl Streep, and Robert Redford could attract American audiences, grossing only $15 million. Though Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) won Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture, the movie grossed only $17 million domestically. A noticeable reversal of this trend began with Bigelow's follow up war movie *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which centered on the historic hunt for bin Laden. The fact that most viewers knew of the movie's ending (i.e. the death of bin Laden) benefitted *Zero Dark Thirty* as a jingoistic counter to the other commercially unsuccessful War on Terror movies, as it ultimately grossed $95.7 million domestically and $132 million worldwide. Recent war movies *Lone Survivor* (2013) and especially the commercial juggernaut *American Sniper* (2015) have furthered *Zero Dark Thirty*'s success, but it could be argued that other factors such as star appeal, a presold story (both are based on books), and temporal distance from 9/11 benefitted these films.

Though these war movies prior to *Zero Dark Thirty* approached the War on Terror and its ensuing issues in various ways, what they do have in common is that American audiences expressed their general apathy by *not* watching them in theaters. As Wetmore (2012) claimed, "It is almost as if American filmgoers did not want to see 9/11 and its military and political aftermath on the screen" (p. 1). To nuance Wetmore's argument, American audiences did not want to see 9/11 and its aftermath in such a *direct* manner onscreen. Judging from the low box office grosses of these movies, audiences did not want to watch the real issues of war unfold in such a blatant manner. Instead, audiences sought an amalgam of both the real and fictional worlds, a genre that tapped into the true terror of 9/11 yet distanced itself enough so that viewers could escape into the fictional narratives and identify with the struggles of its characters. This returns us to Thompson's message at the opening of this report: horror cinema has historically manifested fears and anxieties during times of civil unrest, and after 9/11 the horror genre was "sitting there" waiting to deal with one of the darkest days in American history.

The horror subgenres that emerged after 9/11 dealt with a number of relevant and unsettled issues in American society. While "found footage" movies tapped into iconography from the terrorist attacks via handheld cameras documenting real terror, "home invasion" movies reiterated a similar message sent on 9/11: death is random, unwarranted, and can strike at any time and place. Both of these subgenres are worthy of their own academic analyses as they proved their social relevance and appeal to audiences with such hits as *The Strangers* (2008) and the *Paranormal Activity* series. However, both of these subgenres merely continued the history of horror cinema addressing social issues through allegory and implicit connections. The focus of this study, torture porn cinema, not only manifested unsettled cultural anxieties through allegory and implications, but it pushed the connection between horror cinema and

society into a less abstract place. That isn't to imply that there was an obvious relationship between torture porn and Abu Ghraib, nor that there were there any specific mentions of Abu Ghraib and the War on Terror like in the previously discussed war films. Rather, the three torture series established a *more direct* connection that sometimes remained metaphoric and even abstract, yet at other times was more explicit. The *Saw* series' most consistent and identifiable character is the torturer that only punishes for a greater good; *I Spit on Your Grave* and its sequel center on morally ambiguous American women who sexually torture their enemies to restore order; and the signature torture scenes of both *Hostel* movies incorporate overt Abu Ghraib iconography such as the undressed, hooded victim. That isn't to contradict the argument that war movies prior to *Zero Dark Thirty* failed because they were too realistic; rather, it is to emphasize the fine line that separates cinema and social events during times of ideological conflict. While *Rendition* and *Lions for Lambs* may have hit too close to home for a country at war, torture porn walked this line between vapid entertainment and heavy-handed allegory.

The trajectory of this cinematic phenomenon is best examined in relation to its temporal distance from Abu Ghraib. While *Saw* is indeed the most profitable horror franchise of all time, a closer look reveals that the torture porn trend waned towards the end of this series. *Saw VI* (2009) grossed a franchise-low $27.7 million domestically when it competed with the apex of another horror subgenre, the fount-footage movie *Paranormal Activity* (2009). *Hostel* (2005) and *Hostel: Part II* (2007) were both widely distributed in U.S. theaters, but *Hostel: Part III* (2011) received only a direct-to-DVD release. Despite the cult status and avid followers of the original, both of the *I Spit on Your Grave* remakes only received an extremely limited theatrical run in twelve theaters for *I Spit on Your Grave* and just one theater for *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (Box Office Mojo) then were both immediately released on DVD.

Torture porn directors are moving on to different projects as well. *Hostel* creator Eli Roth continues to pursue other subgenres of horror with the cannibal film *The Green Inferno* (2015) and the home invasion thriller *Knock Knock* (2015). *I Spit on Your Grave* director Steven R. Munroe also continues in horror, though not torture porn specifically, with his upcoming *The Exorcism of Molly Hartley* (2015). The multiple directors of the *Saw* franchise have dispersed into other genres, such as *Saw* writer-director James Wan helming *Fast and Furious 7* (2015). Though torture porn's current role in American society may not be as prevalent as it once was during the mid-to-late 2000s, there is no denying the social relevance and lasting impact of these movies as they served a wider cultural function by providing American audiences the means to process complex sociocultural issues post-Abu Ghraib.

Torture porn benefitted from having Abu Ghraib not only as a concise event to reference, but also a specific concept to exploit: the torture of Iraqi prisoners. This revelation provided myriad opportunities for debate and civil unrest that polarized the American public. Was the torture justified? What if we were the ones tortured? What else don't we know about our own government? Seizing these ideological crises as its foundation, torture porn took off with the commercially successful *Saw* in 2004 and *Hostel* in 2005. Though they were widely denigrated as excessively violent, mindlessly sadistic, and even "disgusting" according to some critics, these movies presented torture as entertainment—albeit challenging and often disturbing entertainment— at a time when the Abu Ghraib photographs presented torture as a very real and ongoing threat. It's worth noting that these photos, or "trophy shots" as Sontag (2004) argues, seem to have been intentionally staged and taken to entertain the U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib, rather than simply documented for unspecific reasons. Furthermore, stylistic and thematic elements of the torture series forced viewers to consider the Abu Ghraib victims in a

more visceral manner. Viewers watched through Josh's point-of-view as he crawled away from his torturer in *Hostel*, and key characters in all three series followed Carol Clover's (1992) "double-axis revenge plot" by fulfilling the role of both torturer and victim. Torture porn challenged viewers to identify not just with the torturers—i.e. the U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib—but also with the victims, thus arguably encouraging Western audiences to be more empathetic towards the Iraqi victims of torture in an era when they were—prior to Abu Ghraib— almost unanimously presented as the enemy. While movies in other genres referenced Abu Ghraib or concepts from the prisoner abuse, most notably *Zero Dark Thirty* and its interrogation scenes, torture porn's social function transcended simply turning a profit for studios as this subgenre addressed and exploited the American public's fear of torture following Abu Ghraib.

This was not the first instance of torture-centered horror throughout the genre's history, nor will it be its last. As Steffen Hantke remarked, "Modern horror has always been prone to such incestuous tendencies, so much so that it can be difficult to distinguish innovations from repetitions" (p. 235). Such torture precedents as *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), and even the original *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) reveal this is not a novel approach in scaring audiences, and the surge in the 2000s of remaking classic horror movies such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and *The Amityville Horror* (2005) further support this "incestuous" tendencies argument. But what truly distinguished torture porn from other similar movies throughout history is the social context in which it emerged. To reiterate Towlson's (2014) earlier point, "The horror film enjoys phases of popularity particularly during the 'bad times,' the times of economic depression and war. Cycles of the horror film can […] be closely linked to cycles of history" (p.5).

Perhaps this is relevant to the larger question of why horror movies *matter*. To many moviegoers and critics, horror cinema is regarded as "low culture" and lacking in artistic value due to its frequent use of graphic violence, vapid characters, and thin plotlines. Torture porn, in particular, is "widely considered the lowest common denominator in the global reinvestment in horror" (Briefel and Miller, 2011, p. 84) and is immediately discredited simply by its derogatory label implying that, like pornography, torture porn lacks in artistic value. But as this study has argued, along with countless other analyses examining the genre, horror cinema can be relevant and, in some cases, it can even be subversive. Torture porn joined this long tradition of horror cinema addressing and challenging major social issues head on in ways that other genres of the era could not, or in ways that other genres attempted but to a far less commercially successful extent. This is because horror operates outside of societal boundaries, where it is able to "challenge the status quo during times of ideological crises with radical social commentary that attacks traditional values through the use of ideological shock" (Towlson, 2014, p. 5). The prevalence of torture, the moral ambiguity of characters, and identifying viewers with the torturers as well as the victims in these series highlighted the extreme desire for progress in the War on Terror that manifested in the U.S. military's visually documented abuse of Iraqi prisoners. The fictional onscreen death and torture in these movies also served a greater social purpose by addressing real death and torture in a society still recovering from the revelation of the photos from Abu Ghraib, thus allowing American audiences the opportunity to encounter the threat of torture in a safe and even cathartic manner. Torture porn may have polarized viewers with its prolonged depictions of violence and graphic sexual content, but the *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* series emerged as examples of radical social commentary where, post-Abu Ghraib, social critique disguised itself in the most denigrated art form of them all.

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